

JIMMY CARTER, “CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE,” WASHINGTON D.C. (15 JULY 1979)

Christopher Bondi
Butler County Community College

Abstract: Jimmy Carter’s 1979 “Crisis of Confidence” speech is an often overlooked yet significant address in presidential history. Despite Carter’s attempt to pull America out of a crippling energy crisis using ethical appeals and a critique of American consumerism, conventional wisdom holds that the speech was ill-advised and contributed to Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980. In retrospect, however, Carter’s rhetoric of sacrifice and spiritual renewal remains worthy of study for what it teaches us about the American psyche and rhetorical leadership.

Keywords: Jimmy Carter, Crisis of Confidence, Patrick Caddell, presidential rhetoric

On the evening of July 15, 1979, millions of television viewers witnessed one of the highlights of Jimmy Carter’s leadership during his four years as president. In an address lasting roughly thirty minutes, Carter responded to concerns over an increasingly serious energy crisis, but he went well beyond that topic to warn of an even more serious and crippling economic, social, and spiritual problem: a “crisis of confidence” that threatened America’s future. According to Lucas and Medhurst, the president believed that America had lost its faith in its civic institutions as well as its belief in a shared national purpose.¹ The nation was at a crossroads, Carter argued, and it needed not only new energy policies but a rebirth of America’s moral purpose.

Fast-forward to the early 2020s; domestic and global events again call to mind some of the context for Carter’s address. In 1974, Richard Nixon resigned rather than face impeachment; in 2017-2020, Donald Trump became the first United States president to be impeached *twice*. In 1970, the shooting of protestors at Kent State sparked massive demonstrations around the country; in 2020, protestors expressed anger and outrage over the deaths of George Floyd and other African Americans killed by police. In 1979, the Soviet Union sent troops into Afghanistan and heightened global fears of a nuclear catastrophe; today, Russian troops have occupied parts of Ukraine, again leading to global anxieties over the possibility of armed confrontation. In the late 1970s and early 80s, runaway inflation threatened to derail the economy and bankrupt those living on fixed incomes; today, inflation is again a concern, with prices rising faster than they have at any time since Carter’s presidency. In the 1970s, gas prices soared, and its availability grew scarce. Today, national gas prices have reached all-time highs, and the nation is faced with a new energy crisis.

Also, as in the 1970s, Americans today are divided over how best to address these challenges. Increasingly polarized by competing social, economic, and cultural narratives, the American public is fundamentally divided not only over policy issues but also basic philosophies regarding freedom and responsibility. Many Americans seem caught up in what Alasdair MacIntyre dubbed “emotivism,” which is “the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and, more specifically, all moral judgments, are nothing but expressions of preference.”² With no shared moral values or even shared understandings of factual reality, Americans have become increasingly cynical, motivated by “individualistic desires” rather than shared understandings and common concerns.³

In 1979, Jimmy Carter seemed to sense the American public's propensity for emotivism. He feared that narrow self-interests and a loss of faith in government threatened to undermine the national unity necessary to address big problems. For Carter, the energy crisis was, at least in part, a symptom of that larger "crisis of confidence." Thus, Carter delivered a rather philosophical speech, warning Americans about larger, more ominous trends in American politics and culture. His words sought to persuade the American people that they were better united rather than divided, and that it was up to each American to do his or her part.

Presidents do not traditionally tell Americans that they are partly to blame for their own problems, nor do they humbly admit their own shortcomings. Yet, that is precisely what Carter did. Rather than placate people's sensibilities by suggesting American perseverance was dependent solely upon government actions, Carter challenged the nation to be self-reliant. He proposed that neither he nor the government could solve America's energy problems. The solution, by and large, would have to come from the people themselves. In assigning that burden to the American people, Carter took a political risk. In the short term, there were many positive responses to Carter's gamble, but he subsequently squandered that goodwill with a hasty, confusing reorganization of his entire cabinet two days later.⁴ As more people questioned his leadership on a variety of fronts, Ronald Reagan capitalized on Carter's growing reputation as the "malaise" president and offered a more optimistic and appealing vision of America's future.

According to Robert Dallek, Americans tend to prefer optimism and positive commentary from their presidents, not assertions of culpability. Hence, the speech ultimately undermined Carter's already tenuous hold on the public.⁵ In the decades since, Carter's speech continues to be remembered as the "malaise speech." The prevailing historical memory of the speech and of Carter's lone term in office is that both were failures. However, Riccards asserts that both deserve reconsideration and a fresh analysis.⁶ Indeed, his suggestion is well-founded and will be explored here. The driving argument of this essay is that Jimmy Carter's "Crisis of Confidence" speech was a courageous attempt to exercise leadership in a moment of crisis *and* a more timeless reflection on the responsibilities of democratic citizenship. The economic, social, and international problems that the country faced during Carter's term parallel those of today. We should, therefore, study the speech more closely and glean whatever wisdom we can rather than simply dismiss it as rhetoric of "malaise."

The first section of this essay will revisit the historical events that shaped the energy crisis of the 1970s. Next, I revisit Carter's 1976 campaign, recalling some of the reasons that Carter's persona appealed to a public disillusioned with politics and anxious about the future. In the third section, I focus on the leadup to the speech, Carter's Camp David summit, and the influence of chief pollster, Pat Caddell, on Carter's framing of the nation's problems as a "crisis of confidence."

Turning to the speech itself, I first focus on the preparation of the speech and how Carter's devotion to it heightened expectations for the speech. Following that, I examine the text of the speech itself, showing how it was part philosophical reflection and part policy address that tied the idea of energy use to spirituality. In the final two sections, I first recall reactions to the speech from the public, the media, and other interested observers, and discuss how Carter's ill-fated actions afterwards led to his 1980 election defeat. Finally, I offer a few reflections on the legacy of the speech, arguing that Carter's words ring true today as we grapple with another period of high inflation, widespread anxiety, and uncertainty over not only our energy future but the future of our democracy itself.

The Energy Crisis: A Historical Overview

In the decade following World War II, oil emerged as one of America's most precious commodities, as it literally fueled people's lives. It "heated homes and buildings, powered generators to create electricity, and made by-products such as plastics,"⁷ all of which made life easier for middle-class Americans. From 1945 through 1959, the oil industry prospered, as production grew by more than 50 percent. During this same period, however, consumption rose by 80 percent, creating a widening gap between supply and demand.⁸ Slowly, collectively, and perhaps unwittingly, Americans were painting themselves into an economic corner.

Despite the growing imbalance between supply and demand, oil-producing states had, since the 1930s, set "allowable production quotas to existing oil fields within their territories."⁹ The idea was to make the market less volatile and protect smaller, independent oil producers.¹⁰ Yet those limits on production failed to keep up with demand, and the nation increasingly became dependent on foreign oil. Before long, America was importing more oil than it produced. Meanwhile, families in the United States explored their newfound space and consumer freedom as a national suburban sprawl marked by highways, strip malls, subdivisions, and houses shifted the mindset of the country.¹¹ In essence, consumerism became the new national pastime, which only exacerbated America's energy dependency. Additionally, Americans took for granted their easy access to plentiful resources.

By the start of the 1970s, transportation accounted for one-fourth of the nation's total energy consumption.¹² People living further from major cities now required greater fuel supplies in order to drive to work, which caused two problems: First, the automobile (and other gas-powered vehicles) transformed industrial cities into metropolises, thereby increasing cities' demands for energy.¹³ Second, the increase in gas-powered transportation produced large amounts of photochemical smog (PCS), a form of pollution devastating for human health and the environment.¹⁴ Alarming as well was the drain on the average American's pocketbook. By 1973, foreign and domestic oil supplies fell, triggered by an embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Rather quickly, prices at the pump rose while gasoline distributors began limiting supplies.¹⁵ Before too long, the nation's service stations began running out of fuel.

Those who grew up post-Reagan may find it difficult to imagine being turned away at the gas station with their automobile's fuel gauge near empty. However, at this point in the 1970s, many gasoline stations had lines of cars backed up at the pump, as impatient customers waited sometimes for hours to refill their vehicles.¹⁶ Soon, a larger sense of crisis enveloped the nation as people wondered: How and why did we get here? With frustrations and anxieties running high, Americans began directing their ire toward the nation's institutions, including the major oil companies and the federal government.

It was, perhaps, easy to blame the oil companies. Many people suspected that these large corporations were purposely withholding supplies in order to manipulate prices. They perceived the oil companies as "selfish corporate agents with little regard for workers, consumers, or the environment."¹⁷ This was difficult to refute, given that the oil companies were "making record profits while the country's economy skidded into recession."¹⁸ Yet, as Carter would later suggest, Americans had themselves to blame as well, as for roughly thirty-years they had enjoyed the fruits of the burgeoning energy industry: big cars, big suburban homes, and boundless consumption. A leisure mentality had emerged after WWII, and this new way of life was now at risk. Some even feared its total collapse.

Clearly, government intervention was expected, perhaps something reminiscent of Roosevelt's New Deal.¹⁹ The blame game already had begun, however, with some pointing fingers at the oil companies while others blamed the government. Still others complained that the news media had exacerbated the problem by exaggerating the crisis. The resulting war of words further divided a nation still recovering from the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, both of which had contributed to a loss of faith in America's leaders and institutions. By 1976, America was in dire need of a change in direction and, more importantly, an inspirational leader. For a time, Jimmy Carter appeared to be the sort of leader who might pull the nation out of its economic, social, and spiritual slump.

Enter Candidate Carter

Born in Plains, Georgia, Carter learned from a young age how to live without luxury. His family lived in a rural farming community that lacked both electricity and running water.²⁰ Carter was also exposed to politics at an early age, as both his mother and father immersed themselves in civic life. Carter's father was elected to the Georgia state legislature in 1952, while his mother had devoted much of her time to serving those less fortunate.²¹ Given his upbringing and his family's tradition of hard work, sacrifice, and duty, Carter seemed destined for a life in politics. By the time he ran for President, his personality and temperament aligned well with what the nation lacked at the time—a problem-solving leader who could fix the nation's problems.

Carter had a highly analytical mind. He understood advanced mathematics more than most presidents, and he had a strong background in science.²² These two qualities were evident in his plans for tackling the economic and environmental challenges facing the nation. Far from a technocrat, however, Carter believed that "political leaders should focus more on the human side of problems."²³ This philosophical view extended to his practices as Governor of Georgia, as he publicly derided segregation and spearheaded the political advancement of African Americans, women, and minorities.²⁴ Once his gubernatorial term ended, Carter turned his attention toward the White House.

In an article entitled, "Electing Ourselves in 1976: Jimmy Carter and The American Faith," Christopher Lyle Johnstone argues that within the issues and themes of presidential campaigns are clues to the "anxieties, desires, needs, and aspirations of the American people."²⁵ When examining the 1976 presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter, it becomes clear that he understood Americans' anxious and cynical attitude about government and was determined to restore their faith in both the country and themselves.²⁶ Carter was, often by his own admission, a southern populist whose brand of politics had traditionally been concerned with eliminating governmental waste and opposing elitism.²⁷ By voting for Carter, the people chose a Washington outsider who promised to "clean up the mess in Washington" and build a government that worked for the people.²⁸ However, much of Carter's tenure in office would be mired by political crises, partisanship, and legislative stalemates. It all came to a head in 1979, when a second wave of the energy crisis reinforced the public's belief that the government and politicians in Washington D.C. were incapable of solving America's most pressing problems.

Leadup to the “Crisis of Confidence”

From the moment of his inauguration in January of 1977, Carter “wrestled with the intrinsic issues related to energy and its management arguably more than any other American leader.”²⁹ By confronting energy head on, the thirty-ninth president attempted to “seize a historical moment” and move the nation’s energy use in a new direction so that a repeat of 1973’s energy crisis would not occur.³⁰ Not everyone agreed with Carter, however. Many Americans considered the 1973 crisis an anomaly and thought energy was no longer an issue.³¹ Still, Carter persisted and made energy his top domestic priority on his first day in office.

Carter put the onus for the decade’s energy shortages on Americans’ “careless consumer habits,”³² but neither the American people nor the media seemed convinced by the president’s assertions or his proposals for dealing with the issue. His plans called for price increases on energy as well as hikes in gasoline prices through taxes. This only resulted in a “legislative battle [that divided] the [Democratic] party, pitting producers in the South against consumers in the North and also setting environmentalists against New Deal liberals.”³³ Meanwhile, according to Republicans, Carter’s energy plan was suspect for two reasons: 1) it relied heavily on government control, and 2) it assumed a pessimistic view of the future.³⁴ As a result, the nation’s response to Carter’s energy policy proposals was lukewarm at best.

Midway through his term, the enthusiasm Carter had generated during his candidacy had waned, the public’s confidence in the future had declined, and the president’s popularity had plummeted.³⁵ His administration’s attempts to curb America’s appetite for energy or to find a solution that would reduce the country’s reliance on foreign oil had also hit a wall.³⁶ The impression was that Carter and his administration did not know what they doing and were only making a bad situation worse.³⁷ Not helping matters was Carter’s rhetoric, which was increasingly perceived as scolding rather than inspirational and pessimistic rather than hopeful.³⁸ People wanted abundant energy at reasonable prices rather than a critique of how materialistic and self-indulgent they had become.³⁹ In effect, Carter was telling the American people something they did not want to hear.

Despite trying nobly to lead the nation, Carter was often his own worst enemy. His methodical mind and his penchant for micromanagement worked against him,⁴⁰ as did his pattern of taking on politically unpopular issues because he believed it was the right thing to do.⁴¹ Further, Carter was not a particularly charismatic president. While many admired him personally, they considered him a flawed leader and communicator due to a perceived lack of personal magnetism.⁴² Carter’s primary speechwriter, Jim Fallows, suggested that Carter thought in “lists, not arguments,”⁴³ while Carter’s White House Communications Director, Gerald Rafshoon, argued that Carter’s inability to move the nation with his words was “the single greatest reason” why the Carter presidency was not more successful.⁴⁴ As it stood, Carter’s lack of communication, his leadership style, and his perceived stubbornness not only hurt his presidency but also deepened the general public’s skepticism toward politicians with a reputation for high intelligence.⁴⁵

The situation only worsened during the Iranian Revolution in late 1978. This led to the second oil shock in less than a decade. Inflation rose to more than 12 percent and gasoline prices increased by 55 percent during the first half of the year.⁴⁶ As the crisis expanded, gasoline distributors limited their supplies. Soon, most of the nation’s service stations once again ran out of gasoline. It was an all-too-familiar situation for many Americans. In 1979, just before Carter’s “Crisis” speech, roughly 90 percent of all gasoline stations in the New York metropolitan area

were closed.⁴⁷ As in 1973, the energy and economic situation in the nation had come to a head, thereby compelling Carter to address the nation directly.

First, though, Carter retreated to Camp David for ten days, supposedly to gauge the mindset of the nation and to plan the speech. While there, he spoke with a number of invitees, including elected officials, intellectuals, members of his own administration, and ordinary citizens, and he listened intently to their thoughts about America's problems and its future. Years later, Carter reflected on the Camp David meetings, saying, "I sat on the floor and took notes. We assessed the cabinet and my staff. Their criticisms of me were much more severe, including the basic question: Can I govern the country?"⁴⁸ One person in attendance during these discussions was former president Bill Clinton, then governor of Arkansas. The meetings also included some of the most influential scholars and social commentators of the day, including Christopher Lasch, Daniel Bell, and Robert Bellah. Also in attendance was the president's wife, Rosalynn, and his chief pollster, Patrick Caddell.

Caddell was especially integral to the "Crisis" speech, having recently drafted a 107-page memorandum about the nation's spiritual problems, titled, "Of Crisis and Opportunity."⁴⁹ The memo suggested that the country suffered from a lack of confidence, community, sacrifice, and moral obligation.⁵⁰ It was inspired in large part by Lasch's work, *The Culture of Narcissism*, and it triggered Carter's moral sensitivities and compelled him to address the nation about the issue.

While inspiring Carter, Caddell's memo had alienated members of Carter's staff, most notably his Chief Domestic Policy Advisor, Stuart Eizenstat, and Vice-President Walter Mondale.⁵¹ Mondale was particularly angered by Caddell's assertion that there was a psychological problem with America.⁵² Yet, Carter remained intent on expressing to the nation what he and Caddell believed—that America's energy and economic problems were rooted in a deeper "crisis of confidence" that threatened to undermine the nation's ability to respond to any crisis that might emerge. Eventually, a compromise was reached among Carter and his staff whereby the "Crisis" speech would contain elements of Caddell's memo but also outline concrete steps to tackle the energy crisis and rally Americans to Carter's cause.⁵³

While these heated discussions took place, the nation was left in the dark as to what Carter was up to, leading only to speculation and rumor.⁵⁴ Some even suggested that the president had exiled himself to Camp David because of a nervous breakdown.⁵⁵ The resultant lack of information coming from Camp David further lowered Carter's already sagging approval ratings.⁵⁶ Now, more than any other time during his presidency, Carter needed to communicate clearly to the American people and prove himself worthy of their trust, while also showing them a clear path to a more hopeful future.

Crafting the "Crisis of Confidence" Speech

Carter's "domestic summit" at Camp David became the impetus for the most important speech of his political career. Carter had "channeled the discussions beyond the subjects of energy and economics to the larger question of the nature of the leadership he and his administration [were] providing."⁵⁷ Taking a cue from Pat Caddell, and leaning into his own strong sense of faith, Carter would frame the energy crisis as a moral crossroads at which America had arrived. Carter's speech would emphasize this pivotal moment and his desire to lead the nation in a different, more reflective direction. Once the press and the public were finally made aware of Carter's Camp David retreat and the upcoming national address, suspense mounted. A few days before the speech, a front-page story in the *Washington Post* expressed

anticipation with the following headline: “Carter Seeking Oratory to Move an Entire Nation.”⁵⁸ This was shaping up to be a make-or-break moment for Carter’s reelection bid and for his overall legacy. Apparently aware of this, Carter worked to overcome his traditionally lukewarm attitude toward speechmaking.

As a politician, Carter had not always embraced the intricacies of speechmaking. He typically had written his speeches alone or had simply ad-libbed, which he was more comfortable doing. This often frustrated his speech writers.⁵⁹ Further, Carter disliked working with texts and, according to his chief speechwriter, Jim Fallows, he had “a wooden ear.”⁶⁰ He also avoided rehearsing speeches and resisted working with a speech coach.⁶¹ This tendency to downplay the importance of speechmaking did not bode well for Carter’s upcoming address. Given the high stakes of this speech, however, the president worked more diligently. He utilized all input he had received from Camp David, including “conflicting recommendations” from some of the participants.⁶² The process had been enlightening but tiring, for those with whom the President had spoken did not refrain from giving him their honest opinions about the state of the nation and his leadership. Yet, Carter accepted even the harshest criticisms with grace and humility.

Carter would also spend a lot of time practicing. He rehearsed inside a mock-up of the Oval Office at Camp David, and he even utilized a speech coach to polish his delivery. On July 12, Carter spent nearly the entire day perfecting his address,⁶³ and on the day before he was to speak the President reviewed the speech several times and practiced it once again.⁶⁴ As a result of his efforts, on the evening of July 15, the nation witnessed a presidential address “delivered flawlessly . . . with an intensity that matched the occasion.”⁶⁵ On this night, Americans would see a different side of President Carter; he spoke intimately, passionately, and directly. Some thought Carter’s message brave; others called it foolhardy. In fact, his vice president, Walter Mondale, had been so against Carter delivering the speech that he had nearly resigned.⁶⁶ Despite the misgivings of Mondale and other staff members, Carter was intent on delivering *his* message—that many of the nation’s problems were self-inflicted. The blame for the crisis did not rest solely at the feet of only the government or even the big oil companies, but also at the feet of Americans themselves.

Analysis

As Carter began the speech, formally titled “Energy and the Crisis of Confidence,”⁶⁷ he sat at the oval office desk, one hand resting atop the other. He spoke in a soft, measured tone:

Good evening. This is a special night for me. Exactly three years ago, on July 15, 1976, I accepted the nomination of my party to run for President of the United States. I promised you a President who is not isolated from the people, who feels your pain, and who shares your dreams, and who draws his strength and his wisdom from you (1).⁶⁸

Carter’s opening was reminiscent of a farewell address, which occurs “in response to a systematic need for a ritual of departure.”⁶⁹ Obviously, Carter was not yet leaving office, but he *was* calling for a departure from the cynicism that had sprouted during the Watergate years and that plagued his first years in the White House. As Samuel and Dorothy Rosenman observed, Watergate had “demonstrated that . . . presidential authority was abused and perverted to a vast degree before the countervailing pressures, partly owing to a stroke of luck, could be brought to

bear.”⁷⁰ Here, in the speech’s opening passage, Carter reminded his listeners of his promise to restore faith in government and in the American ideal of elected leaders whose power was granted to them by the people.

Carter’s inaugural address, like all inaugurals, had sought to unify the country and “forge an American community out of his listeners.”⁷¹ From day one, he had attempted to restore trust in the government, and in his “Crisis” speech he admitted that he had not yet fulfilled that promise.⁷² Since Carter’s vision for the nation had failed to materialize, he was now tasked with addressing this problem directly. He began by recounting his search for deeper causes, wondering why he and the nation had been unable to “get together to resolve our serious energy problem.” Carter suggested that “the true problems of our nation are much deeper—deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession” (4). Then, Carter stated simply, “As President, I need your help” (4). This simple sentiment revealed Carter’s attitude toward the office he held. He did not consider himself to be an-all powerful political elite, but rather an ordinary citizen placed in a position of power with an obligation to serve, not to command.

Next, Carter quoted from several people he had invited to his domestic summit—some of these included a Southern governor, a labor leader, “a religious leader” (15), and a “young Chicano” (13). Many remarks were rather blunt toward Carter and his administration. Carter paused between each statement, seeming almost self-reflective each time: “Mr. President, you are not leading this nation—you’re just managing the government” (6). “You don’t see the people enough anymore” (7). “Some of your cabinet members don’t seem loyal” (8). Also, rather interestingly, as Carter read each comment his demeanor suggested a certain regret, perhaps even sadness, that he had disappointed his fellow Americans.

Carter continued with more revealing comments that pointed to an increase in the gap between haves and have-nots: “I feel like ordinary people are excluded from political power” (12). “Some of us have suffered from recession all our lives” (13). “Some people have wasted energy, but others haven’t had anything to waste” (14). Carter’s recitation of each comment reinforced his pledge to listen more closely to the American people, and it suggested that he was genuinely concerned about the struggles facing ordinary Americans. Additionally, by reading these comments Carter did what other leaders most often do not—offer their pulpit to the American people and allow their voices to be heard. This differs from countless presidential addresses whereby the nation’s leader attempts to speak *for* us, and many times only *to* us.

Carter claimed that his ten-days of listening to Americans confirmed his faith in the “decency and the strength and the wisdom of the American people,” but it also pointed to the nation’s “underlying problems” (27). He admitted that he had achieved only “mixed success” (28) in addressing those problems through legislation. At the same time, he recalled a theme from his inaugural address that legislation alone could not “fix what’s wrong with America” (28). Now, Carter would reveal the primary argument of his speech: The larger problem was a “crisis of confidence which struck at the nation’s social fabric.”⁷³ Carter suggested that the drain on the nation’s confidence was worse than an energy drain; it threatened the foundations upon which the nation had been built. It was a product of a decline in traditional values and an increase in a new type of worship:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. (32)

To call it a bold remark may be an understatement. According to Carter biographer Jonathan Alter, it was “a moment of breathtaking honesty that had no precedent and will almost certainly never be repeated.”⁷⁴ For presidents rarely, if ever, go so far in challenging the nation’s people.⁷⁵

But Carter was only getting started. He cited the findings of polls to back up his argument. “For the first time in the history of our country,” he stated, “a majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years” (33). He then noted that two thirds of Americans “do not even vote,” and that the “productivity of American workers” was “actually dropping” (33). Further, the “willingness of Americans to save for the future” had “fallen below that of all other people in the Western world” (33). At one point, he echoed Christopher Lasch, stating, “Just as we are losing our confidence in the future, we are also beginning to close the door on our past” (31). He also echoed Robert Bellah, pointing to “a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions” (33). Carter was now in full-on Jeremiad mode, making his point that the energy and economic issues plaguing the nation correlated to a decline in the spiritual practices of the nation. His voice turned stern, and he stated: “This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning” (33).

Carter softened his tone and concluded his reflection on the crisis of confidence by invoking Daniel Bell’s argument about why Americans had lost faith in government. He suggested that while the people had looked to the government for help, the government had become “isolated from the mainstream of our nation’s life” (35). He acknowledged, too, that “the people are looking for honest answers, not easy answers; clear leadership, not false claims and evasiveness and politics as usual” (35).

Although Carter had borrowed from Lasch, Bellah, and Bell, and had listened to a variety of speech writers and advisors, including Caddell and Gerald Rafshoon, Carter himself “played a commanding role in shaping his talk,” and his personal notes revealed significant “differences between raw material and delivered speech.”⁷⁶ The first half of the speech in particular reflected Carter’s decision to take a different approach to a topic he already had addressed four times—the energy crisis. While this section echoed some of his 1976 campaign rhetoric, Carter’s decision to disclose several comments he had received during the Camp David discussions, particularly those most critical of him, was unprecedented for a sitting president. This expression of humility is one reason for the speech’s uniqueness.

A second reason for the speech’s uniqueness is Carter’s framing of the crisis as a problem in which *everyone*—from government to big business to ordinary citizens—shared blame, but also a problem that everyone could help fix. This suggestion came midway through the speech: “What can we do” (37)? In answering that question, Carter called for a restoration of the faith, unity, and confidence that saw America through the Great Depression and two world wars, and that “just ten years ago put a man on the moon” (38). America was at a “turning point,” Carter argued, and there were only “two paths to choose:” the path of “fragmentation and self-interest” or “the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values” (40). Carter claimed that the latter path “leads to true freedom for our nation and ourselves,” for it represents “all the traditions of our past, all the lessons of our heritage, [and] all the promises of our future” (40). Far from rhetoric of malaise, this was rhetoric of hope.

It was also presidential rhetoric laced with spirituality, a third reason for its uniqueness. For Carter’s words stressed not only the importance of policy but also the importance of national faith: “We simply must have faith in each other, faith in our ability to govern ourselves, and faith in the future of this nation” (37). Restoring that faith and confidence to America, Carter

concluded, was “now the most important task we face. It is a true challenge of this generation of Americans” (37). With this statement, Carter did what he was perhaps most talented at doing—calling on his deep sense of spiritual devotion to try and move others.

Having presented the more philosophical points of the speech, Carter moved into its last portion. This final part contained more traditional presidential rhetoric, as he offered the sort of concrete policy proposals for which Vice President Mondale and others had advocated. Carter’s six-point plan included import quotas on oil, federal investment in new, alternative sources of energy, and a “bold conservation program” designed to involve state and local governments as well as “every average American in our energy battle” (51). He concluded with a call to action, urging his listeners to participate not merely in politics but in a rebirth of the nation’s spirit: “Let your voice be heard. Whenever you have a chance, say something good about our country. With God’s help and for the sake of our nation, it is time for us to join hands in America. Let us commit ourselves together to a rebirth of the American spirit” (60).

And with the faintest of smiles and in the same tone of voice with which he began, Carter bid his listeners goodnight. Now, all there was to do was wait for the reactions from the press, the politicians, and the sixty-five million Americans who had just watched this most unusual of presidential speeches. Even more than the speech itself, all eyes would be on Carter’s actions and whether they would support his bold words. There was indeed wisdom and, perhaps, truth conveyed in the speech, but would Carter set those words in motion?

Aftermath

According to the polls, the American people responded quite favorably to Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech. Many appreciated the president’s “sincerity and passion,”⁷⁷ and his approval ratings spiked almost immediately. *Newsweek* reported that Carter’s approval rating increased by 11 percentage points overnight, while a *Gallup* poll registered a 17-point increase.⁷⁸ Telephone calls and supportive mail poured into the White House over the next several days, congratulating Carter and offering support.⁷⁹ Several news outlets also offered positive critiques of the speech. Writing for *The New York Times*, Adam Clymer argued that the public agreed with President Carter and that the nation did indeed suffer from a crisis of confidence.⁸⁰ The *Washington Post* similarly praised Carter’s “politically crucial speech,” noting that it had been delivered “with far more force and seeming conviction than any other Carter address to the nation.”⁸¹ Even the more conservative *Wall Street Journal* noted Carter’s “forceful new style in communicating with the public.”⁸² Christopher Lasch—whose writings had helped shape several of the central themes of the speech—called it “courageous, powerful, and often moving” and praised Carter for speaking “realistically about the country’s troubles without invoking a mood of panic or national emergency.”⁸³ Given the positive feedback from a variety of sources, it appeared that Carter may have resuscitated his presidency just in time for the 1980 election cycle and strengthened his presidential legacy.

Then, it all went wrong.

While some in the media and in various political and special interest groups expressed skepticism about Carter’s speech, by and large Carter’s rhetoric had won people over. What started Carter’s subsequent downfall and the speech being re-branded “the malaise speech,” were his actions two days later. On July 17, Carter convened a Cabinet meeting that several members would later describe as “one of the strangest and most unsettling meetings they ever attended.”⁸⁴ In a hasty action provoked by conflicting and often confused advice, Carter ordered the

resignations of all of his Cabinet members, then later seemingly pivoted and accepted five of them—half of the total number—back.⁸⁵ The global reaction was alarming, as nations wondered whether the United States government was in crisis or had even ceased to operate.

At home, the sudden cabinet purge completely negated the positive affect of the “Crisis” speech. Carter’s leadership was once again viewed as contradictory, indecisive, and weak. Two days prior, Carter had told the nation that he would be a leader rather than a manager, “then flunked his first test of leadership after the speech.”⁸⁶ As of August 1, the national support Carter had drummed up with his speech had largely dissipated and the critics piled on.⁸⁷ The dominos continued to fall for Carter, as inflation rose higher, American hostages were seized in Iran, and people grew more and more disgruntled. From there, Ronald Reagan effectively disparaged Carter as the “malaise” president and promised a brighter, more positive image of America as the “shining city on a hill.” In 1980, after years of presidential rhetoric focusing on war, political scandal, and seemingly insurmountable challenges, the people chose a president who promised a brighter future.

When Jimmy Carter left office, his approval rating stood at 34 percent; only Harry Truman’s and Richard Nixon’s ratings were lower at the time.⁸⁸ However, Stuart Eizenstat would later argue that when nations “cannot face up to the truth about their challenges and look instead for scapegoats, it is difficult to develop sensible policies.”⁸⁹ Carter became the scapegoat for the problems of the late 1970s and was subsequently labeled the “malaise” president. Ironically, Carter had never used the word “malaise” in the “Crisis” speech at all. In another stroke of irony, the descriptor had come from Pat Caddell. Caddell had gone behind the back of White House Communications Director, Gerald Rafshoon, and had briefed the networks and reporters before the speech, using the word “malaise” to describe the speech’s central theme. Rafshoon and his speechwriters had purposely avoided using the word when helping Carter to draft the speech.⁹⁰ The word has since become synonymous with Carter’s presidency.

However, Carter may have been prophetic. In recent years, the nation has witnessed a resurgence of inflation, high energy costs, threats of violence and war, and a significant decrease in national faith and trust. To students of presidential rhetoric, Jimmy Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech should serve as a rare example of truth-telling from a president bold enough to confront the nation with unpleasant views about its practices and psyche.

The Legacy of the “Crisis of Confidence” Speech

According to Casey Nelson Blake, the “Crisis of Confidence” speech was “a rare moment of seriousness in our recent political history.”⁹¹ Jimmy Carter focused on something not often articulated in presidential rhetoric—what Arnett calls “the basic existential fact that relationships matter.”⁹² In this case, it was the relationship between a president and the American people that mattered to Carter, and he humbled himself before the nation like few presidents before or after. His speech inspired many positive responses at first. Yet, Americans also look for strong actions from their leaders, and Carter failed in that regard. Rather, his hasty and disorganized Cabinet purge only emphasized the need for leaders to back up assertive rhetoric with clarity of purpose.

However, despite the flaws, Jimmy Carter’s term in office and, more significantly, his “Crisis of Confidence” address, are important to presidential rhetoric and presidential history. Carter was asking us individually and collectively to reflect on our practices and attitudes and acknowledge that we are fallible. If we want a better future, we must admit this truth, work together, and make sacrifices. Success will not—nor should it be--handed to us. During this

divisive and difficult time in our nation's history, Carter's call for a more spiritual approach to tackling our collective issues is an alternative to emotivism, partisanship, and inflexibility.

In the end, Jimmy Carter was not blessed with the charisma of other presidents. He did not have John F. Kennedy's grace, Ronald Reagan's eloquence, Bill Clinton's cleverness, or Barack Obama's charm. Yet he did bring to the office the sensibilities of a man from humble roots in rural Georgia whose public service since leaving office has made him one of our more popular former presidents.⁹³ In his "Crisis" speech, Carter assured his listeners that America's "political and civil liberties" would "endure."⁹⁴ Yet, even those fundamental rights now seem in doubt, as Americans continue to struggle with many of the same challenges that Carter tried to warn us about. Therefore, we must not dismiss President Carter nor his words of warning. Rather, we must look beyond Carter's limitations as a politician and focus more on his rhetoric. We must also look beyond misrepresentations of Carter's words as rhetoric of malaise and pinpoint the truth, hope, and wisdom contained therein.

Author's Note: Christopher Bondi completed his Ph.D. at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He would like to thank Dr. Craig Maier, Dr. Janie Harden Fritz, and Dr. Ronald C. Arnett for their guidance on this project as it reached the dissertation stage. He would also like to thank Dr. J. Michael Hogan for his unending assistance and advice as the work evolved.

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