

The Other Side of the Prism: Explaining and Refuting the Image of a Weak and
Indecisive Jimmy Carter

By

Ty Johannes

Baccalaureate Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
Department of History of Vanderbilt University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for
Honors in History
2006

On the basis of this thesis and of
the written and oral examinations
taken by the candidate on
4/14/06 and on 4/26/06
we, the undersigned, recommend
that the candidate be awarded
High Honors in History

Ernest Walker
Ewin C. Idempere
Frank W. Kiel

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Introduction

Politics did not stop at the water's edge in the Cold War United States. Although foreign relations played a minimal role in domestic politics in the first years of the Cold War, by 1952, Republicans were using KC² – Korea, Communism and Corruption in the Democratic Party – and Dwight Eisenhower's promise to go to Korea to end the war to take control of the White House. From that point on, foreign policy and domestic politics became inseparable, and they interacted in different ways. Presidents were sometimes forcibly constrained by Congressional action, especially after Vietnam and Watergate. Sometimes, the President used foreign policy to influence his domestic political standing, allowing himself to be constrained or impelled by domestic opinion about his foreign or domestic policies, often to improve his prospects for re-election. The seizure of the Mayaguez in 1975, the withdrawal from Lebanon in 1984 and the moderation of Soviet rhetoric in that same year are examples of this.¹

The relationship between foreign policy and domestic politics goes both ways, however. Domestic opinion of a President colors everything about him, including his foreign policy. This was a particularly pronounced phenomenon in the 1970s. Gerald Ford did a cannonball into political quicksand with his pardon of Richard Nixon. His approval rating dropped from 71 percent in mid-August to 50 percent on September 8,

¹ For other historical examples of the interplay between foreign policy and electoral politics, see Melvin Small, "The Election of 1968," *Diplomatic History* 2004 (28)513-528 or Jeff Shesol, *Mutual Contempt: Lyndon Johnson, Robert Kennedy and the Feud that Defined a Decade* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997) to see the appeal of Robert Kennedy in 1968 as an antiwar candidate. There is also political science literature on the subject. See John H. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan and Eugene Borgida, "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates Waltz Before a Blind Audience?" *American Political Science Review* 1989 (83)123-141 for a review of the literature to that point. See Jon Hurvitz and Mark Peffley, "The Means and Ends of Foreign Policy as Determinants of Presidential Support," *The American Journal of Political Science* 1987 (31)236-258 (1987) for an argument that the public's judgments on foreign policy matters factored into approval ratings.

after the pardon.² He did not help himself by slipping on the steps of Air Force One in 1975. These factors caused Ford to be depicted as intellectually incompetent and physically clumsy. When this happens, it colors everything a President does that is even remotely controversial. It places the President in an unenviable situation. It renders extremely difficult comparisons between the President and other Presidents who enjoyed much more favorable situations. Yet because pundits, armchair political enthusiasts and even scholars inevitably make such comparisons anyway, it causes the Presidents who faced such an unenviable situation to be judged incorrectly. America in these times was fertile ground for mythmaking, as is seen by considering Jimmy Carter.

In a 1980 Republican campaign commercial, Carter's face filled the screen as a voice-over told viewers that "Jimmy Carter's weak, indecisive leadership has vacillated before events in Angola, Ethiopia and Afghanistan. Jimmy Carter still doesn't know that it takes strong leadership to keep the peace. Weak leadership will lose it." The same commercial played a portion of Ronald Reagan's speech from the Republican Convention in which he stated that "we know only too well that war comes *not* when the forces of freedom are strong. It is when they are weak that tyrants are tempted" [emphasis in original].³ This message – which was simply a continuation of a chorus that had sung throughout Carter's term – combined with Reagan's landslide victory in November prepared the way for the myth of Ronald Reagan on the white horse, riding in to save the United States from the weak, indecisive and incompetent Jimmy Carter.

² Charles O. Jones. *The Trusteeship Presidency: Jimmy Carter and the United States Congress* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988), 16.

³ "Reagan: Peace," *Living Room Candidate*, online, http://livingroomcandidate.movingimage.us/election/index.php?nav_action=election&nav_subaction=overview&campaign_id=172.

This image of Carter has transcended partisan politics and crept into the historical literature. Burton Kaufman, for instance, has issued one of the most scathing and all-inclusive critiques in scholarship in arguing that the Carter Administration was a “hapless administration in disarray and of a presidency that was increasingly divided, lacking in leadership, ineffective in dealing with Congress, incapable of defending America’s honor abroad, and uncertain about its purpose, priorities and sense of direction.”⁴ Carter, Kaufman argues, had a contradictory Soviet policy that sent one message to Americans and another message to the Soviets. Gaddis Smith has argued that Carter lacked the foreign policy grasp to successfully prevent crippling contradictions from arising from his advisers’ disputes.⁵ Even John Dumbrell, who offers a more favorable picture of Carter on the domestic front, argues that “in foreign affairs, in particular, the [split between National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance] destroyed the coherence of the decisionmaking machinery.”⁶ Richard C. Thornton ties these criticisms together by summing up: “A failure of leadership – indecision, a lack of imagination, and most importantly, tentative adoption of half-measures – characterized the Carter Presidency.”⁷

It is my argument that Jimmy Carter was strong, decisive, and in possession of a clear, coherent foreign policy vision. The image to the contrary initially came about during Carter’s presidency when he was distorted by the jaded prism of domestic opinion. Whatever achievements Carter could muster mattered little – Ted Kennedy’s popularity

⁴ Burton I. Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 3.

⁵ Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

⁶ John Dumbrell, *The Carter Presidency: A Re-Evaluation*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

⁷ Richard C. Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order* (New York: Paragon House, 1991).

as an alternative candidate continued to soar. Observers seized only on those words with which they disagreed. Complexity easily became confusion before such an unsympathetic audience. Carter's political world was impervious to his boosts of momentum.

Three factors created the domestic political quicksand in which Carter stood. The first of these was the great variety of domestic opinions on foreign policy. The Cold War Consensus had died with Vietnam. In its place, public opinion had split roughly evenly into several positions that were, in many ways, mutually exclusive with each other. Carter had the unenviable task of piecing together some coalition of support from these groups, meaning there would always be observers who disagreed with him. Congress was also divided, along simpler hawk/dove lines, but the worst divisions were in the President's own party. The Republicans were more consistently hawkish.⁸ After the midterm point, this came to be even more of a problem, because the Republicans could smell blood and wanted to regain the White House, meaning they would give Carter little support. The Democrats, often concerned about how Carter impacted their own political support, offered little in the way of partisan support to counterbalance this, creating a very difficult situation.

There was also a great philosophical gap between Carter and liberal elements of his own party. Carter was a fiscal conservative who was one of the first Democrats to realize that government operated within limits. It could not spend an infinite amount, and it could not will the SALT II treaty to Senate ratification when there were vocal and strong elements opposing it. Carter understood that the price of ratification was a sizable increase in the defense budget to show that the treaty would not weaken American

⁸ For more on domestic political divisions, see Richard Melanson, *American Foreign Policy Since the Vietnam War: The Search for Consensus from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) and Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

security posture. If this was to coexist with an overall spending limit to control inflation, some social spending had to be cut. This was simply unacceptable to many liberals and was a source of Ted Kennedy's allure.

Carter criticism also had a personal element. He was a Southerner, very openly religious, had little regard for the Washington establishment, and spoke oddly at times (he used the word "nuclear," for example). He was not a northeasterner from the old liberal guard, and he was not a Kennedy. He did not look Presidential to some. As a result, his actions, like those of other Southerners such as Lyndon Johnson and George W. Bush, were not always evaluated on the merits.

These factors – opinion on foreign policy, opinion on domestic policy, and a personal element – together created a prism that distorted Jimmy Carter's image in a manner that was self-perpetuating. He was disliked, and therefore was seen in the worst possible light. Therefore, he was disliked even more.

In this thesis, the primary mechanism I use to show that Carter was actually decisive and exerted strong leadership is a narrative that emphasizes prioritization.⁹ Concluding the second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty -- SALT II – with the Soviet Union was Carter's paramount foreign policy goal; all others were subordinated to it. Achieving a peace treaty in the Middle East between Israel and Egypt was almost as important. Carter demonstrated a great deal of personal involvement in these issues at the expense of other issues, even some that had reached crisis stage. Carter began fighting for SALT II ratification long before the treaty was even signed; such behavior is hardly

⁹ For other arguments that Carter was actually strong and decisive, see Robert A. Strong, *Working in the World: Jimmy Carter and the Making of American Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2000), and Erwin Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of the Public Good* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988).

characteristic of an aimless wanderer. I demonstrate the prioritization of these two issues by juxtaposing them with a non-priority: the Nicaraguan revolution. While the Sandinista rebels, who would eventually topple dictator Anastasio Somoza, were little more than an annoyance when Carter took office, the revolution had been fomenting for some time. The country was Somoza's fiefdom, and the army – the Nicaraguan National Guard – was Somoza's personal army. In 1974, Somoza ordered the Guard to wipe out the Sandinistas – with little regard for human rights. Somoza's rule had steadily served to raise Nicaraguan ire against him, and in 1978, the situation reached crisis stage with the Sandinista seizure of the National Palace in August.¹⁰ Carter's deep involvement in SALT II and the Middle East contrasted sharply with his non-involvement in Nicaragua.

This thesis, in chapter one, lays the groundwork for the narrative with a discussion of Carter's foreign policy vision and the era of crumbling political consensus in which it was established and implemented. Subsequently, it follows Carter's pursuit of the two aforementioned goals through the time period of the Nicaraguan crisis. It follows the Middle East peace process from Camp David, in September 1978, which established a framework for a peace treaty, through the subsequent negotiations and finally to Carter's March 1979 trip to the Middle East that concluded the treaty. It follows Carter's pursuit of SALT II, both its signing and ratification, through the treaty's signing at the Vienna Summit in June 1979. It follows the American handling of the Nicaraguan crisis, from September 1978 when officials first recognized that the country had reached crisis stage and began to craft a policy, through the resulting attempt to mediate a resolution between Somoza and the Sandinistas and its failure, to the Final Offensive in June and

¹⁰ For more on Nicaragua, see also Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

July of 1979 that finally ousted Somoza. It follows Carter from a time when he had firmly established himself in office after a first year in which he had to learn a great deal on the job, through a period that was not characterized by dramatic alterations in the geopolitical or domestic political world in which Carter had to work. Instability in Nicaragua and Iran had been fomenting for some time – true external shocks like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the taking of American hostages in Iran had not yet happened. It follows American politics through a chaotic, transitional time in which the parties and public were fracturing and shifting.

In the course of this narrative, the reader will meet a President Carter who had a vision, set policy goals, deeply involved himself in issues, made decisions, overruled advisers when necessary, thought ahead and was more in tune with the country's political situation than many other Democrats. The image of Carter as a weak non-leader is wrong. However, the reader will also meet a Carter whose domestic political standing was crumbling underneath him for reasons not entirely his own fault, explaining how the image of weakness came about. The narrative begins in the season of the midterm election campaigns, which is about the time that talk about the next Presidential candidates begins to gain momentum. Ted Kennedy attracted a great deal of attention and popularity as an alternative Democratic candidate for 1980, largely on the basis of the philosophical divide between Carter and other Democrats. He hovered over Carter constantly, even when the President was achieving great successes. The philosophical divide, fractured opinion on foreign policy and the personal element of Carter criticism created a very jaded prism, and the reader will see that Carter's weak political position colored everything he did.

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(Cambridge University Press, 2006), xix

upon its soundness and not because of political strategizing.¹³ He built his policy around “a clear goal: to create a wider framework of international cooperation suited to the new and rapidly changing historical circumstances.” These changing circumstances meant new problems and, just as importantly, new awareness of these problems. New nations, new nationalisms, newly widespread education, and new aspirations had increased awareness of “the new global questions of justice, equity and human rights.” These problems did not lend themselves to unilateral solutions, but could only be solved by cooperation among nations.¹⁴

This vision was both characteristically Wilsonian and unique. The reason Carter gave for exalting international cooperation as paramount was that “our policy is rooted in our moral values, which never change” – an undercurrent characteristic of Wilsonian visions. Carter’s view also had a religious undercurrent, however.¹⁵ As a born-again Christian whose faith shaped everything he did, Carter emphasized the “fundamental *spiritual* requirements” (emphasis added) of dignity and freedom. The absolutism of belief in unchanging morality is also most characteristic of religious outlooks. Nations should behave as humans would, and humans (in Carter’s mind) would behave in accordance with the second commandment as given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: love your neighbor as yourself. In the world of the late 1970s, this entailed

¹³ Carter’s disdain for conventional politics is well established in both primary and secondary sources. See, for example, Zbigniew Brzezinski Interview, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Jimmy Carter Oral History Project, 2/18/82, p. 87; see also Erwin Hargrove, *Jimmy Carter as President: Leadership and the Politics of Public Good* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1988), 1-9. These sources also suggest that Carter, though he never became a great politician, did become more politically savvy as his term progressed.

¹⁴ University of Notre Dame – Address at Commencement Exercises at the University, 5/22/77, American Presidency Project. For more on Carter’s characterization as a Wilsonian, see Gaddis Smith, *Morality, Reason and Power: American Diplomacy in the Carter Years* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986).

¹⁵ See D. Jason Berggren, “‘I Had a Different Way of Governing:’ The Living Faith of President Carter.”, *Journal of Church and State*, 47:43-61. Berggren also makes the interesting (and valid) point that Carter’s post-presidential activities function as additional evidence that Carter’s Presidential professions were genuine and not merely born of political expediency.

cooperation in order to alleviate the world's most pressing problems. Not all Wilsonians are openly religious Christians the way Carter was (and not all openly religious Christians are Wilsonians); this aspect of his thought gave him a uniqueness that set him apart from other Wilsonians.

A major way humans cooperate is to reach agreements, often embodied in contracts; Carter thought this to be a splendid way of conducting international relations. The five cardinal principles of Carter's foreign policy all related to achieving international cooperation by negotiating contractual agreements. The first principle was "America's commitment to human rights as *a* fundamental tenet of our foreign policy [emphasis added]." One reason Carter gave for the importance of human rights was that "In the life of the human spirit, words are action, much more so than many of us may realize who live in countries where freedom of expression is taken for granted." His emphasis on the importance of words and ideas was, at least in part, a manifestation of his broader worldview: words are the language of agreements and contracts. Negotiations among people are not concluded with tanks, bombers or other forms of conventional weaponry. States were to be no different.

The relation between Carter's other four principles and his broader, cooperative worldview was even simpler. His second tenet was "to reinforce the bonds among our democracies" – in other words, strengthen America's traditional alliances. Carter's third principle was to halt the strategic arms race, by "reach[ing] agreements" and taking "joint steps with all nations." The fourth principle was peace in the Middle East. Carter emphasized negotiations in this area. Finally, Carter aimed to reduce nuclear proliferation by "trying to get other nations, both free and otherwise, to join us in this effort."

Cooperation is the common theme that runs through all of these principles. For humans, the best way to handle conflict or potential conflict was cooperation and cultivating good relations with others. The global community was no different.

Principle governed not just Carter's goals, but his method as well. Foreign policy had to be conducted openly, so that the United States could "speak with the voices of 215 million, and not just of an isolated handful." Carter intended to "shape an international system that will last longer than secret deals. We cannot make *this kind of policy* by manipulation. Our policy must be open; it must be candid" (emphasis added). The moral undercurrent that shaped Carter's pursuit of cooperation shaped how he would pursue that cooperation; manipulation was incompatible with a policy built on dignity and freedom. This was a philosophy in tune with New Internationalist sentiments and had been shaped in part by Vietnam and by Richard Nixon's secrecy and eventual scandalous departure from office.

Carter's sincerity is convincingly illustrated in his margin notes on a classified memorandum not intended for public consumption from his National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Born in Poland in 1928 and educated in Canada before receiving his Ph.D. from Harvard, Brzezinski, like Henry Kissinger, came to the White House from an academic background. Brzezinski had been on the faculty at Columbia since 1960 (and would remain so until 1989) and had served in the State Department's Policy Planning Council from 1966-1968. He was the Director of the Trilateral Commission from 1973 to 1976, and it was here that he met Jimmy Carter. The Commission was looking to recruit a "forward-looking Democratic governor" and Brzezinski knew that Carter, as governor of Georgia, wanted to open up trade between his state and the

Common Market and Japan. Carter was therefore invited to join the Commission. In 1974, after Carter declared his candidacy for President, Brzezinski caught wind of this and made an offer of advice. Carter accepted, and in 1975, Brzezinski sent in his first check and began to write foreign policy papers for the candidate regularly. By 1976, Brzezinski was Carter's principal foreign policy adviser.¹⁶

Brzezinski saw clearly the necessity of cooperation – he called it “global interdependence.” He criticized Nixon for not paying enough attention to less-developed nations – for both moral reasons and reasons of national self-interest - and for neglecting America's allies. Brzezinski set forth an alternative policy as early as 1973; long before becoming a part of any political campaign, with the central priority as “the active promotion of such trilateral cooperation” between the United States, Europe and Japan in order to “create a stable core for global politics.” This kind of cooperation, Brzezinski thought, was required to solve the real problems in the current world. The arrangement should consist in “deliberate, closer and more institutionalized political consultation” to attain the cooperation required.¹⁷

The American-Soviet relationship, while outside the Trilateral Relationship, was still a key concern. Brzezinski advocated arms control to reduce the danger of an accidental war. He also advocated a security posture “which by itself reduces the likelihood that the Soviet leaders could at some point conclude that the moment is ripe for the extraction of political gains through the generation of a severe atmosphere of crisis.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983), 5-6

¹⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, “U.S. Foreign Policy: The Search for Focus,” *Foreign Policy* 51(4), 723

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 720-721

In early 1976, by then part of the campaign, Brzezinski prepared for Carter a statement of goals that was to form an outline of a basic foreign affairs campaign speech. It contained three broad goals: to “create a stable inner core for world affairs, based on closer collaboration among the advanced democracies;” “to shape on the above basis more stable North-South relations,” and “to promote détente with the Soviet Union and to court China. Détente, of course, is desirable but it ought to be more reciprocal. Moreover, since the element of rivalry remains a reality, it cannot be the basis for coping with global problems.” Carter liked this list and it became the basis for a campaign speech in June.¹⁹

Brzezinski’s philosophy of method was less in tune with Carter than that of goals. In his 1973 article, Brzezinski had recommended a mixture of realism and planetary humanism (his term for what I have called Wilsonian idealism), writing that “downgrading of national might, of diplomacy, and of the more traditional tools of international behavior could jeopardize the chances for peace by prompting international instability...[but] the planetary humanists can rightly assert that an essentially Machiavellian foreign policy is incapable of tapping the moral resources of the American people...an amoral America is also likely to become a lonely America.”²⁰ Foreign policy, then, required that all tools be used, both Machiavellian maneuverings and openness. Carter showed his disagreement with this position in his comments on a Brzezinski memo from April of 1978. The document is the closest thing to a “smoking gun” that shows Carter’s vision of a cooperative, moral international system. Carter wrote only 10

¹⁹ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 7

²⁰ Brzezinski, “U.S. Foreign Policy: The Search for Focus,” 718-719

words – his efficiency was Lincolnesque, and the document deserves careful examination.²¹

Brzezinski entitled his discussion “A Contractual or Flexible Foreign Policy?” and, in his first two paragraphs, set forth his basic criticism: “I am struck by the degree to which [our foreign policy] can be rightly called a ‘contractual’ foreign policy...it is reminiscent of legal negotiations and it does not adequately take into account the need to manipulate and influence the political processes.” This characterization of Carter’s foreign policy was substantially correct, if put in a negative tone. Brzezinski’s next paragraph is reprinted in full. The underlined portions were underlined not by Brzezinski, but by Carter with his pen.

“Yet foreign policy, though involving the foregoing [negotiations and contracts], also involves the need to influence attitudes and to shape political events. This requires a combination of additional steps, none of which we have yet truly employed. In some cases, what is needed is a demonstration of force, to establish credibility and determination and even to infuse fear; in some cases it requires saving publicly one thing and quietly negotiating something else; in many cases what is needed is prolonged and sustained exchange of political views, so that even our enemies share or at least understand our perspectives. Often it does not require solving problems but striking the right posture and sometimes letting problems fester until they are ripe for action.”

In the margins, roughly near “demonstration of force” and “infusing fear” is written, in Carter’s hand. “Like Malaguez? [sic]” The S.S. Mayaguez was a cargo ship off the coast of Cambodia that, on May 12, 1975 (just after the fall of Saigon), was boarded and seized by the Khmer Rouge. A special operation returned the Mayaguez crew safely 3 days later. In May 1976, however, the Government Accounting Office (GAO) released a report that accused the Ford administration of taking unnecessary

²¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #55” 4/21/78, “Weekly Reports [to the President] 53-60, [4/78-5/78]” folder, Box 41, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

action and ignoring potential political solutions.²² Carter was on record as believing that the report was substantially correct – “I understand that the report today is accurate,” he said in the second Presidential Debate.²³ There can be no doubt that Carter’s note was intended to be a condemnation of Brzezinski’s suggestion.

Just below the Mayaguez note, next to the other underlined portions, was, in Carter’s hand, “Lying?” To say one thing and do something else was morally wrong. If a private citizen did it, it would be called lying; ergo, when a country did it, it should be called lying as well. There was no room for negotiation on this point. Carter clearly felt that Brzezinski was proposing something that was just not – or should not be – done. The next paragraph has been entirely deleted (for security reasons). Carter’s marginalia, however, has not. Carter scrawled the notes “Proxy war,” “?” “?” and “?” The question marks show that whatever Brzezinski wrote was foreign to Carter. The method the National Security Adviser was proposing had no place in Carter’s worldview.

Brzezinski’s conclusion appears as follows. Again, the underlining is in Carter’s pen, not Brzezinski’s typeface.

“I will be developing some ideas for you regarding the above, but at this stage I simply wanted to register with you a basic point: namely, that our foreign policy has to operate on many levels and use many tools. The world is just too complicated and turbulent to be handled effectively by negotiating “contracts” (the last two lines are deleted).”

Carter’s response, written in pen, in the margin, is short and to the point: “You’ll be wasting your time.”

Informed by a Wilsonian outlook, Carter established his foreign policy priorities. In early 1978, Brzezinski set forth for his boss three “Must Win Issues” for the following

²² “The Seizure of the Mayaguez: A Case Study in Crisis Management,” May 11, 1976, online, <http://archive.gao.gov/f0302/a02828.pdf>.

²³ “Second Carter-Ford Presidential Debate,” 10/6/76, American Presidency Project.

year: progress in the Middle East, Panama Canal Treaty ratification, and SALT/CTB (Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which would later be divorced from SALT and pursued separately). Several more issues were defined as “High Priority,” but it was clear that, once the Canal Treaties were ratified in April, the true priorities would be in the Middle East and Russia.²⁴ This strident pursuit of peace and conflict resolution is exactly what we should expect from one with Carter’s worldview.

Although Carter’s Wilsonian foreign policy was quite similar to that advocated by the New Internationalists, he came to office as their influence was beginning to decline. The same elections that brought Carter into office in 1976 made this clear in retrospect – though it was not obvious to everyone at the time. Fourteen seats changed hands in the Senate and produced a significant rightward shift on foreign policy. Republicans who lost seats were replaced by Democrats who were conservative on foreign policy, which was a net ideological wash. Democrats who lost seats tended to be from the New Internationalist school and were replaced by Republicans who produced a significant rightward move.²⁵

This very phenomenon helps illustrate the more general fracturing of foreign policy opinion that characterized the era. The early Cold War period had been characterized by a consensus, a set of foreign policy assumptions on which a majority of elites and the public generally agreed, such as belief in activism, globalism, containment, and deference to the executive in foreign affairs.²⁶ According to Richard Melanson,

²⁴ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #42,” 1/13/78, “Weekly Reports [to the President] 42-52: [1/78-3/78]” folder, Box 41, Donated Historical Material, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library. Brzezinski updated the priorities in June, and U.S.-Soviet Issues (with SALT and CTB mentioned specifically) and the Middle East were indeed on the list.

²⁵ Johnson, 230-231

²⁶ Richard Melanson, *American Foreign Policy: Since the Vietnam War: The Search For Consensus from Nixon to Clinton* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 8, 12-13

however, public opinion fractured after Vietnam, relatively evenly, into four groups. One group was the isolationists. Another was the hardliners who believed in the Cold War, containment and the domino theory. A third group consisted of accommodationists, who felt that the Cold War was all but over. There was also a fourth group of traditional internationalists, who believed in a mixture of accommodationist and hard-line views. Elite opinion was more concentrated than public opinion – nearly all legislators were internationalists of some stripe. Congress was split by New Internationalists and traditional Cold Warriors. Complicating matters further was that the deepest divisions were in the President's own party, with the Republicans more consistently hawkish.

The result of this was that Carter often found himself without a party, as demonstrated by four foreign policy Senate votes in the first half of 1978. These votes were the Panama Canal Treaties, approval of a Middle East arms sales package, a lifting of the Turkish embargo and maintaining sanctions on Rhodesia. Carter won all four votes, but the makeup of the voting blocs show the difficulties of his political situation.

Just fifteen Senators (eleven of them Democrats) voted with Carter on all four votes. Those who had joined with Carter 75% of the time could not be counted on in the future as reliable votes, as Brzezinski pointed out:

“The 3 out of 4 votes [25 senators, 19 of them Democrats] must be watched most carefully for defections. It probably contains many Democrats who think they have done enough and many Republicans who may think they have done too much already” (emphasis in original).

Forty-seven senators – 26 Democrats – voted with Carter on half of the foreign policy votes. This group included some prominent Democrats – including Ted Kennedy, Scoop Jackson and Daniel Patrick Moynihan -- and some prominent Republicans –

including Barry Goldwater and Jacob Javits.²⁷ Clearly, Carter drew little benefit, at least on foreign policy, from being a member of the majority party. As these items show, he did not really *have* a party. He had to cobble together the votes from both sides of the aisle on an issue by issue basis. Worse, he had to do this while battling significant Republican partisan opposition (as Brzezinski said, they could not help Carter *too* much) while drawing little benefit from Democratic partisanship.

The fracturing of foreign policy opinion was just one thing that hamstrung Carter politically. He also had a fundamentally different view of the country than the Democratic establishment – a more moderate, fiscally conservative one. Hamilton Jordan, Carter’s assistant, Chief of Staff after mid-1979, and one of a small number of people that had direct access to Carter’s office whenever he wanted it, noted that Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill had “spent all of his life wanting to be speaker of the House and to have a Democratic President. ‘My God, we’ve got this Democrat that’s not doing what Hubert Humphrey or Lyndon Johnson would have done.’” Such philosophical differences have strong effects on foreign policy. If a President is trying to limit spending, as Carter was, then money spent on defense is money that cannot be spent on government programs.

Carter would need to become more politically aware in order to build support for his priorities in such a climate, and a nudge from Brzezinski helped him realize that. In the same 1978 memo that set the priorities, Brzezinski advised Carter to toughen his rhetoric and adopt some conservative policies to prevent his policy from being perceived as too dovish:

²⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #69,” 8/4/78, “Weekly Reports [to the President] 61-71: [6/78-9/78]” folder, Box 41, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library

“Foreign policy to a large extent is a matter of nuance and tone...my own judgment is that the liberal model corresponds best to the nature of global change and provides the more fruitful approach for a creative American role in the world. Our ability to adopt that posture, however, will be greatly weakened politically if we are seen as primarily following a liberal² [accommodationist] approach; we can even gain some political support if, from time to time, we seem to be adopting a somewhat tougher conservative posture, especially on such matters as the Soviet role in the world, Cuban “neo-colonialism”, or on human rights.”²⁸

In the first six months of that year, Carter gave two foreign policy speeches in which he took this advice, while trying to make sure he did not lose the support of those who felt his policy should be very dovish. This caused him to look incoherent when he was, in fact, employing a calculated political strategy.

On March 17, Carter discussed U.S. defense policy at Wake Forest University. The speech contained parts directed at the hawks of the Right and parts directed at the doves of the Left. Carter described the state of the world, saying that “Our potential adversaries have now built up massive forces armed with conventional weapons – tanks, aircraft, infantry, mechanized units.” These words served to show the hawks that Carter recognized the reality of the world and the need for strong defense. The task remained, however, to persuade the doves of that need, and he duly took up the task when he pointed out that “adequate and capable military forces are still an essential element of our national security. We, like our ancestors, have the obligation to maintain strength equal to the challenges of the world in which we live, and we Americans will continue to do so.” He also acknowledged that “over the past decade, the steady Soviet buildup has achieved functional equivalence in strategic forces with the United States,” which again served to

²⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #42,” 1/13/78, “Weekly Reports [to the President] 42-52: [1/78-3/78]” folder, Box 41, Donated Historical Material, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

show that he had his head out of the clouds and understood that there existed potential threats to U.S. national security.

How would Carter deal with that fact? He named three ways: “by maintaining strategic nuclear balance, by working closely with our NATO allies to strengthen and modernize our defenses in Europe; and by maintaining and developing forces to counter any threats to our allies and friends in our vital interests in Asia, the Middle East and other regions of the world.” Here, Carter was not merely showing concern for U.S. interests overseas – from his inauguration he had believed in alliance-building as key to safeguarding them – but doing it, at least in part, *on the terms of his political opponents* – strong conventional defense and military forces. He also identified specific programs to this end – MX intercontinental ballistic missiles and the Trident II submarine. Near the end of his speech, he addressed the doves:

“We can readily afford the necessary costs of our military forces, as well as an increased level, if needed, to prevent any adversary from destabilizing the peace of the world. The money we spend on defense is not wasted any more than is the cost of maintaining a police force in a local community to keep the peace. This investment purchases our freedom to fulfill the worthy goals of our nation.”

These words, however, were also an attempt to score political points with the hawks by making their sales pitch. This should be instantly apparent from Carter’s analogy of the “police force.” a sharply ironic choice of words given Carter’s preference of non-intervention. Thus, this (as well as the rest of the speech) was, in significant part, an attempt to shift his public perception rightward, which would make the country more hospitable to his arms control policy. It was a SALT stump speech that made little mention of SALT. His few mentions of it were qualified, such as:

“Arms control agreements are a major goal as instruments of our national security, but this will be possible only if we maintain appropriate military force levels.

Reaching balanced, verifiable agreements with our adversaries can limit the cost of security and reduce the risk of war. But even then, we must – and we will – proceed efficiently with whatever arms programs our own security requires.”

Carter had not only tried to take a tough stance on defense, but had referred to the Soviet Union as an adversary. The task remained, however, to restate – in tough terms that would allow him to sell a SALT agreement to the American public – the broad contours of his Soviet policy. The seeds for the Annapolis speech may have been planted in April, when Brzezinski opined, “I am quite convinced that unless détente becomes comprehensive and reciprocal, we will face an increasing rebellion at home, and SALT will not be ratified”²⁹ (emphasis in original). He warned Carter to “not stand for a selective détente, in which the Soviet side arbitrarily defines the rules of the game.” Soviet interference in Africa, obstruction of Middle East peace, and portrayal of a “special” American-Soviet relationship to frighten China and Europe were all unacceptable to Brzezinski. He recommended that Carter, through Vance who was about to make a trip to Moscow, communicate this to the Soviets.

Just as important, however, was communicating it to the American public. Though he may have been spurred on by Brzezinski, Carter devised the Annapolis speech himself, showed it to Vance and Brzezinski and told them both that this was the line he would expect them to take.³⁰ Before a new class of graduates at his alma mater on June 7, Carter laid out a vision of U.S.-Soviet relations. He summarized:

“To be stable, to be supported by the American people, and to be a basis for widening the scope of cooperation, then détente must be broadly defined and truly reciprocal. Both nations must exercise restraint in troubled areas and in troubled times. Both must honor meticulously those agreements which have already been reached to

²⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #53,” 4/7/78, “Weekly Reports [to the President] 53-60, [4/78-5/78]” folder, Box 41, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

³⁰ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 320.

widen cooperation, naturally and mutually limit nuclear arms production, permit the free movement of people and the expression of ideas, and to protect human rights.”

Carter then extended an olive branch of sorts, noting his willingness to cooperate and his desire to obtain a SALT II agreement. He then enumerated several differences between the two superpowers, showing why the United States was superior:

- “To the Soviet Union, détente seems to mean a continuing aggressive struggle for political advantage and increased influence in a variety of ways.”
- “The Soviet Union attempts to export a totalitarian and repressive form of government, resulting in a closed society.”
- “We are also strong because of what we stand for as a nation: the realistic chance for every person to build a better life; protection by both law and custom from arbitrary exercise of government power; the right of every individual to speak out, to participate fully in government, and to share political power.”

The United States, Carter pointed out, had nothing to worry about. He then called on the Soviets to end their meddling in Africa, reminding them that they could “choose either confrontation, or cooperation. The United States is adequately prepared to meet either choice.” Carter had effectively staked out a position of clear American superiority over the Soviets. He had also tried to show that he would not allow the Soviets to do whatever they chose. SALT could now be placed in a context of being just one element of a comprehensive and reciprocal relationship in which both sides accommodated the other in order to preserve peace, while maintaining ideological competition.

It is important to realize that Carter’s Soviet policy had not changed. Competition, cooperation and a comprehensive and reciprocal détente were not new elements in Carter’s thinking. They had been present in Brzezinski’s memo from the campaign. What was new was framing them in tougher terms that emphasized defense over diplomacy.

Carter would later learn, however, that he had failed to significantly help SALT’s prospects. Brzezinski’s assessment November of the new Senate was that “if you are

pessimistic, the solidly against group and the leaning against could add up to as many as 32.” It would only take 34 “no” votes to kill the treaty. He counted just 47 (20 short of passage) senators in the solidly for and leaning for groups.³¹ Despite his recognition of the problem and efforts to correct it, Carter had not reached the public or the Senators. What went wrong?

The Wake Forest speech did not stay in the news for long and received scant editorial comment, which makes the question hard to answer. Clayton Fritchey provided a liberal response in the op-ed pages of the *Washington Post*. It reacted negatively to Carter’s new harsh rhetoric, holding Carter’s campaign promises – such as his promise to cut defense spending by 5-7% - and early Presidential statements, such as his warning against an “inordinate fear of communism,” against him. He made it quite clear that he believed that Carter was spending too much on defense, insinuating – with a reference to Dwight Eisenhower – that the money should be spent on liberal programs instead. Fritchey was reflective of the liberal doves, who thought that the campaign promises represented excellent policy and wanted to keep the money in social programs. It is clear that Hamilton Jordan was correct with his diagnosis of a difference in philosophy between the Administration and more liberal Democrats. Not only were there foreign policy differences as such, but the domestic differences carried over into foreign policy because, for a budget-conscious President, a tough foreign policy with a high defense budget is incompatible with big spending liberal programs.³²

³¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #79,” 11/9/78, “Weekly Reports [to the President] 71-81: [9/78-12/78]” folder, Box 42. Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

³² Clayton Fritchey, “A Return to Old American Bombast,” 3/25/78. *Washington Post*, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers

Yet foreign policy hawks did not buy Carter's goods either. Carter's tough rhetoric simply rung hollow with them. They saw it as one step forward, two steps back. The day after the Wake Forest speech, aides made it public that the speech was intended for domestic political support as much as foreign policy (which was not exactly a subtle point). The hawks, represented in one article by Republican National Committee chairman Bill Brock, saw this as watering down the speech. Steps like these showed, in their view, that Carter was "frightened by [his] own boldness."³³ It should have been painfully obvious that it would require more than a speech to win support from the hawks.

Yet Carter still gave the Annapolis speech, and this one received far more coverage than the Wake Forest speech. It was a failure, as revealed in a poll taken by CBS/*New York Times* that asked people how they would describe Jimmy Carter's position toward the Soviets. Respondents were divided: 41% said he favored relaxing tensions, while 35% said he favored a get-tough policy. Six percent said both or neither.³⁴ The speech had apparently not clarified much. Harris polls also offer the ability to estimate the combined effect of both speeches. Before the Wake Forest speech, Americans were asked to rate Carter's "working for a SALT agreement with the Russians to limit arms." The results were poor: 29% positive, 49% negative and 22% not sure. After the Annapolis speech, the results were (without the "to limit arms" part of the question) 21% positive, 63% negative, 16% not sure – a huge nosedive. Carter's rating on "handling of relations with Russia" in February had been 34% positive, 52% negative and 14% not sure. After Annapolis, it was 28% positive, 61% negative and 11% not sure.

³³ Murrey Marder, "GOP Hits Carter Soviet-Cuban Policy," 3/23/78. *Washington Post*, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

³⁴ CBS/*New York Times* Poll, 6/19-23/78, from Roper Center.

Carter's overall handling of foreign policy matters had been viewed to the tune of 38% positive, 55% negative and 7% not sure in February, but after Annapolis, was viewed 25% positive, 67% negative and 8% not sure.³⁵ Now, Carter's speeches were not the only things that happened between these polls – Panama ratification and communist intervention in the Horn of Africa were two intervening foreign policy variables. However, the polls provide the best window we have into the impact of the speeches on public opinion, because they show the same pollster asking the same question at two different times, one before the speeches and one after. They strongly suggest that neither speech accomplished its purpose.

What went wrong at Annapolis? Once again, liberal democrats simply refused to buy Carter's goods. Senator Frank Church immediately told reporters that "the atmospherics in this town will have to improve if the SALT treaty is to have a chance of passage." George McGovern joined with him in saying that this would require Carter to "cool" the anti-Soviet rhetoric. Here we see further evidence that Carter and his party were separated by a wide philosophical gulf. While Carter was willing to reach out to hawks to generate SALT support (because he felt it was necessary), the doves were not. They were rigidly attached to their own paradigms, putting Carter in an extremely difficult position. When he would reach across camp lines, he would lose the support of his own camp.³⁶

The more moderate John Q. Public, meanwhile, may have been drawn to the criticisms of Carter's basic competence that were widespread after the speech. Many columnists simply found the speech to be incoherent: Mary McGrory, whose *Washington*

³⁵ Harris Polls, 6/2-6/78, 6/15-17/78, 2/11-18/78, from Roper Center.

³⁶ Terence Smith, "McGovern and Church Chide Carter on His Speech." *New York Times*, 6/9/78, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers

crises in the Western Hemisphere, and in the process demonstrate strength and leadership for which he has not received adequate credit.

Chapter 2
“A direct responsibility of mine”
August-October, 1978

The Middle East was an issue that fascinated Carter from the start of his Presidency. He did not create the issue, but rather, he inherited an existing context. There was already a basic framework for negotiating Middle East issues in the Geneva Conference, which would include the U.S., the Soviet Union, Israel, other Arab countries, and the Palestinians. Early in his term, in 1977, Carter had proposed a convening of this conference, co-sponsored by the Soviets, but had backed off immediately upon an uproar from American Jews. The other significant context Carter inherited was United Nations Resolution 242 as the basis for resolving disputes in the region. The resolution said that acquiring territory by war (referring to the 1967 Six Day War) was unacceptable – although which territory was in question was destined to remain in dispute. Carter determined quite early in his Presidency that the issues he would have to confront would be Israeli security, the rights of Palestinians under Israeli control in the West Bank and Gaza, and determining which country owned the Sinai Peninsula.

It was in this context that Egyptian President Anwar Sadat shook the world with his visit to Jerusalem in November 1977, an attempt to jump-start negotiations between Egypt and Israel. New Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin soon visited Washington: Begin and Sadat met again shortly after Christmas. Sadat came under heavy fire from other Arabs who feared he would sell out the Palestinians to get back the Sinai, but the Middle East negotiations now consisted of Egypt, Israel and the United States.

Yet progress continued to be elusive. Carter had to convince Sadat not to break off talks in February. But it was the Israelis who were responsible for what appeared at

the time to be the final stonewalling of the talks. In March, in Washington, as Carter recounts,

“I then read to Begin and his group my understanding of their position: not willing to withdraw politically or militarily from any part of the West Bank; not willing to stop the construction of new settlements or the expansion of existing settlements; not willing to withdraw the Israeli settlers from the Sinai, or even leave them there under UN or Egyptian protection; not willing to acknowledge that UN Resolution 242 applies to the West Bank-Gaza area; not willing to grant the Palestinian Arabs real authority, or a voice in the determination of their own future to the extent that they can choose between the alternatives outlined above. Although Begin said this was a negative way to express their position, he did not deny the accuracy of any of it.”³⁸

Yet Carter still wanted to make some effort to solve the Middle East problem, even though every political adviser he talked to said, “Don’t.” At the end of July, mindful that Begin-Sadat meetings were going nowhere, Carter decided to bring the two men in for a meeting with him, at Camp David, still hopeful that such a meeting would lead to a comprehensive peace in the region, including the Palestinians.

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In preparation for the summit, which would begin the first week of September, Carter spent hours poring over briefing books and intelligence reports on Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin. “I wanted to know all about Begin and Sadat,” Carter later wrote. “What had made them national leaders? What was the root of their ambition?...State of their health? Political beliefs and constraints? Relations with other leaders? Likely reaction to intense pressures in a time of crisis? Strengths and weaknesses?”³⁹

Carter paid little heed to other governmental business leading up to the Summit. He wanted to know “personally what the issues were because I felt like that was a presidential responsibility. I wanted [Cabinet officers] to keep me informed about basic

³⁸ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 312

³⁹ Carter, 319-320

issues, and in something that I felt was a direct responsibility of mine, I wanted to know the details about it.”⁴⁰

He tried to insulate himself because the stakes were so high. *The New Republic's* TRB wrote that “if there is a failure it can’t be concealed this time” and that the Summit could be “the last chance” for peace.⁴¹ This summit was something with little precedent in international politics. Rather than a carefully rehearsed meeting with the feel of an opening night on Broadway, this would be an exercise in improvisation – and the whole country knew it. Morton Kondracke explicitly predicted failure.⁴² There was the further complication that if America had to blame the oft-intransigent Israelis for failure, serious domestic problems would result. Sadat, meanwhile, would not be able to ignore the concerns of other Arabs, or he would quickly find himself isolated in the region. War, an oil embargo, a surge of Arab radicalism – all were the possible price of failure.⁴³ But such risk only hardened Carter’s resolve. On Monday, September 4, Carter left for Camp David in order to make final preparations for the arrivals of Begin and Sadat on Tuesday.

*

In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas became more than an annoyance in January 1978 with the murder of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, the leader of a broad-based group that was anti-Somoza and anti-communist. Though it has never been determined if the killing was ordered by Somoza or the Sandinistas, the FSLN was the clear beneficiary. The murder radicalized the country. Throughout 1978, the FSLN began to build up strength and

⁴⁰ Jimmy Carter Interview, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Jimmy Carter Oral History Project, 11/29/82, 16-17.

⁴¹ “The Vandal Congress,” *The New Republic*, August 19, 1978, p. 3.

⁴² Morton Kondracke, “Summit Point Spread,” *The New Republic*, September 16, 1978, p. 7.

⁴³ “Meeting at Camp David,” *TIME*, September 11, 1978, pp. 12-19.

support.⁴⁴ On August 22, the situation reached a new level of escalation when the FSLN seized the National Palace in Managua, killing three, wounding fifteen and taking 1500 hostages.⁴⁵ The hostages were released two days later in return for providing the guerillas safe air passage to Panama. The potential for violence had reached a new level.

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With Carter, Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance all deep in preparations for Camp David, the task of leading a meeting about Nicaragua on September 4 was left to Brzezinski's deputy, David Aaron. David Newsom, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, spoke for State when he pointed out that Somoza would have to go in order to resolve the unrest in the country. Viron Vaky, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, pointed out that the Sandinistas were "extremists with Cuban connections," meaning their ascension to power was undesirable as well. The issue, therefore, was how to remove Somoza without installing the FSLN.

State Department Director of Policy Planning Anthony Lake advocated a mediation effort between Somoza and moderate opposition leaders led by Central American countries but supported by the U.S. Lake acknowledged that the U.S. would eventually have to tell Somoza that they supported such a mediation (clearly designed to remove him from power). The advantage of this method, however, was that the U.S. would not have to make that known immediately. National Security Adviser for Latin America Robert Pastor made the additional argument, and all agreed, that Central American actors would have the legitimacy to involve themselves in the situation

⁴⁴ This account is from Robert Kagan, *A Twilight Struggle: American Power and Nicaragua, 1977-1990* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

⁴⁵ "Guerillas Seize National Palace in Nicaragua," 8/23/78, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic.

provided they defined it as an issue of their national security. The mediation would hopefully replace Somoza with a more moderate leader without publicly involving the United States in Nicaragua's political succession.⁴⁶

The meeting was then distilled down to a memorandum for the President, who was in the final moments before what he thought would be the biggest three or four days of his Presidency.⁴⁷ It said that the U.S. would support a Central American mediation initiative because for Central America, Nicaragua represented a security issue. Carter approved the action. We know this because this policy was pursued (briefly, until it was altered about two weeks later). We also know, however, that Carter was trying to focus as exclusively as possible on Begin and Sadat. Also, Latin American questions already lacked relative importance to Carter – his Secretary of State had even seen fit to delegate them to his Deputy.⁴⁸ Presented with a policy recommended by both State and NSC, Carter was probably inclined to simply approve it so that he could focus on Begin and Sadat. He had chosen his priority, and rather than divide his attention, he would see it through to the end.

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His task began with Begin's arrival on Tuesday, September 5. Brzezinski had warned Carter that he could expect Begin to be intransigent – as indeed he was. He would be very resistant, Brzezinski wrote, to any sort of substantive concessions, believing "that a failure at Camp David [would] hurt you and Sadat, but not him." An acceptable agreement would require Begin to accept UN Resolution 242 on all fronts – including the

⁴⁶ Memorandum of Conversation, "U.S. Policy to Nicaragua," 9/4/78, "Serial Xs – [9/78-12/78]" folder, Box 36, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁴⁷ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, 9/4/78, "Serial Xs – [9/78-12/78]" folder, Box 36, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁴⁸ Cyrus Vance, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 41.

West Bank and Gaza. He would have to accept the principle of withdrawal, terminate organized settlement, and allow Palestinian self-government (though not a Palestinian state).⁴⁹ He also had to be more flexible on the Sinai, which Sadat wanted back.

With Sadat, who always strived to take exceptional care of himself, having gone to bed early, Carter met alone with the Israeli Prime Minister for two and a half hours on Tuesday night. He was dismayed but ultimately not surprised to find Begin as inflexible as ever. He offered no new ideas, but simply rehashed what had been the standard Israeli position: a refusal to recognize the applicability of UN Resolution 242 to the West Bank or Gaza, and a refusal to remove Israeli settlements or airfields from the Sinai.⁵⁰ As Carter would do repeatedly, he reminded Begin of the vulnerability of other Middle Eastern States, the potential erosion of U.S. and Israeli influence in the Middle East, and the desire of the Soviets to return to the region and exert their influence there. He emphasized that the time for final decisions had come. Right from the start, he was constantly reminding Begin that the meeting *must* succeed.⁵¹

Carter got his first opportunity to have a real discussion with Sadat on Wednesday morning. He expected Sadat to come looking to resolve matters of substance. To reach an acceptable agreement, he would not be able to demand a full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank or Palestinian self-determination. He would have to accept a long-term Israeli security presence there. Carter was dismayed and perhaps somewhat surprised when Sadat handed him his initial proposal:

⁴⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, undated, "Strategy for Camp David," "Middle East Negotiations (7/29/78-9/6/78)" folder, Box 13, Donated Historical Material-Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁵⁰ Carter, 335-337

⁵¹ Account from Carter, 335-337

“As I read it my heart sank; it was extremely harsh and filled with all the unacceptable Arab rhetoric. It blamed all previous wars on Israel, and demanded that Israelis offer indemnities for their use of occupied land, pay for all the oil they had pumped out of Egyptian wells, permit the refugees free entry to the West Bank, withdraw all their forces entirely to the original pre-1967 boundaries, allow the Palestinians to form their own nation, and relinquish control over East Jerusalem.”⁵²

There was, of course, no chance of Israel even agreeing to negotiate with such a position. However, Sadat then informed Carter that he had brought along several prepared concessions that he was willing to share with Carter and trust Carter to use in good faith as a proxy negotiator. Sadat’s initial position was very harsh, but there was a very different set of results that he was prepared to accept. Many of these, Carter felt, would likely be pleasing to Israel. They included a willingness to open full diplomatic relations and a statement that Jerusalem should not be divided. Sadat was willing to sign an agreement that did not call for Israel’s immediate withdrawal from the West Bank. The President was optimistic again, because a basis now existed for peace. Sadat required the return of all of Egypt’s land in the Sinai, with full sovereignty over it – but was willing to be flexible on nearly every other point. The posturing stage signified by the initial proposal was still a waste of time, but with Sadat’s prepared concessions, Carter was no longer terribly worried.⁵³

The next day, September 7, Carter had to placate an Israeli delegation that was obsessed with how harsh the Egyptian proposal was and was about to demand that it be withdrawn. The determined President, however, was able to convince the Israelis to simply reject the proposal as unacceptable.⁵⁴ That afternoon, Sadat, convinced that Begin would never remove settlers from the Sinai, became the first of the three men to give up.

⁵² Carter, 340

⁵³ Account from Carter, 339-342

⁵⁴ Carter, 343-353

Carter now had to remind *him* of the price of failure, suggesting the possibility of a Middle Eastern conflict escalating into another World War. Blocking the door, Carter urged both leaders to give him another chance to use his influence. At a meeting later that night with the Egyptian delegation, Carter defended Begin while reminding Sadat of the legitimacy of the Egyptian position on settlements. He also warned again of a potential radical takeover of the Middle East in the event of failure. He outlined the points of agreement that existed: Israel was willing to give back the Sinai and grant autonomy – though what that meant was far from clear – to the West Bank; hopefully, they would agree to stop building settlements on the West Bank and remove them from the Sinai. By the end of the meeting, Carter had convinced the Egyptians to stay. The summit would continue.⁵⁵

But Sadat and Begin would not meet together again. From that point on, Carter would be practicing shuttle diplomacy on a smaller scale, explaining to one side the other's point of view and working out a proposal, then taking that proposal to the other side and doing the same. Little wonder, then, that "[his] world had become the negotiating rooms" by this point, and he tried to involve himself in as little else as possible.⁵⁶ When Carter received the State Department's daily report from Warren Christopher the next day, September 8, and learned that Costa Rican President Rodrigo Carazo was pleased to learn of U.S. support for mediation and continued to consult with other Central American governments, it is hard to imagine the Nicaraguan situation still being on his mind by the time he reached the end of the document.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Carter, 359-363

⁵⁶ Carter, 364

⁵⁷ Memo, Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 9/7/78. "State Department Evening Reports – 9/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

Carter's shuttling, however, soon began to look like it might well be fruitless. Try as he might, he could not produce an agreement. By September 15, he had already decided that the meeting would end in two days, and had asked his staff to begin to prepare a speech to Congress that would explain the failure. Then Cyrus Vance interrupted a meeting between the President and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to say that the Egyptian delegation had packed its bags, and Sadat had asked Vance to call a helicopter.

Carter "envisioned the ultimate alliance of most of the Arab nations to the Soviet Union, perhaps joined by Egypt after a few months had passed." He took several minutes to quietly gather his thoughts and to pray. Then he went to see Sadat.

"I explained to him the extremely serious consequences of his unilaterally breaking off the negotiations: that his action would harm the relationship between Egypt and the United States, he would be violating his personal promise to me, and the onus for failure would be on him. I described the possible future progress of Egypt's friendships and alliances – from us to the moderate and then radical Arabs, and then to the Soviet Union. I told him it would damage one of my most precious possessions – his friendship and our mutual trust."

Sadat agreed to stay after Carter offered him an understanding that no statement signed could be used piecemeal – none of the agreements would remain in effect if any part was rejected by any side.⁵⁸

Yet even with this crisis averted, the final ending would not be much better if an agreement could not be reached. Yet Begin agreed, on the next to last day of the summit, to submit the question of withdrawal from the Sinai to the Knesset (Israeli parliament) within two weeks. Though the question of why is difficult to answer, as Begin never wrote memoirs, Bob Cullen has suggested that this shift was linked to a phone conversation with minister of agriculture Ariel Sharon, who said that he "would not

⁵⁸ Carter, 391-393

object to dismantling the Sinai settlements” in exchange for peace.⁵⁹ To Carter, who was confident the Israeli people would approve in exchange for peace (he was right), this represented a breakthrough.⁶⁰

For the rest of that day and the following day (Sunday the 17th), the three delegations scrambled to put together a final deal. It nearly died when Begin suddenly declared that the wording of the American statement of position on Jerusalem, to be contained in letters, was unacceptable. Yet this roadblock too, was resolved, when Begin accepted a revised draft. The three men had a deal: an agreement on the Sinai and a framework for an Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

Just as everyone in the country knew that the chance of a failure at Camp David had been very real, it was now clear that it had been a success. *TIME* Magazine’s cover story headline was “A Sudden Vision of Peace,” and the six-page article painted the meeting as an extraordinary success. Hugh Sidey wrote that the success at Camp David represented the type of achievement that brings people closer to their President, and that the “sweet fruits of success” could lead to a new beginning for the once-embattled Carter.⁶¹ A *Newsweek* article made clear that everyone in the White House walked around with a spring in their step after Camp David. White House staffers began wearing green buttons bearing the letters, “FCBCB” – For Carter Before Camp David.⁶²

Yet not everyone was willing to view this great success on the merits. Some media reactions made Carter, even in triumph, seem almost infantile. A cartoon in *The New Republic* depicted Carter as a schoolboy sitting at a desk, T-shirt reading “Camp

⁵⁹ Bob Cullen, “Two Weeks at Camp David,” *Smithsonian* 34(6): 56-64.

⁶⁰ Carter, 396

⁶¹ “The Sweet Fruits of Success,” *TIME* Magazine, September 25, 1978, p. 18.

⁶² “Hey, You Hear That Vote?” *TIME*, October 16, 1978, p. 30

David.” paper in front of him, pencil to his chin. His feet do not touch the floor. “What I did at Camp this Summer, by J. Carter” reads the caption, in cursive. “I rode a horse, I learned to swim, I made a book marker for mommy, and I brought peace to all mankind.”⁶³ TRB wrote of the post-Camp David Carter with a tone that contained some of the same Carter-as-child elements as the cartoon. The author *liked* Carter, for all his faults – after all, he entitled his column “Jimmy Parts the Red Sea.” Yet he summarized Carter as

“the despised kid at school who stepped up to bat and clouted one over the fence, bases loaded. He is so easy to underestimate. Enemies didn’t hate him: they patronized him. He is soft-spoken, a poor speaker...He is facing an inflation-recession now and doesn’t know the answer, I think. (Nor does anybody else.) The post-Summit agreement may collapse. Those polls may sink again. But how hard he is trying.”⁶⁴

Carter was simply not presidential to some, and Camp David did not change that. Although he had temporarily dispelled the image of incompetence, some still had personal issues with him, whether it was the way he spoke, his being from the South or his shunning of the Washington establishment. Even his successes, which many could see, would be blunted in the eyes of this group.

In the eyes of many, meaning public opinion, Carter had indeed generated some significant momentum, but it was not likely to turn into a new beginning. He did get off life support, at least temporarily. This is clear from his overall foreign policy approval ratings. A month before going to Camp David, two percent of the population had rated Carter’s handling of foreign affairs “excellent,” and another 19% rated it “good.”⁶⁵ After Camp David, 16% rated it “excellent,” and 40% rated it “good.”⁶⁶ His overall approval

⁶³ Cartoon, *The New Republic*, September 30, 1978, p. 6.

⁶⁴ “Jimmy Parts the Red Sea,” *The New Republic*, September 30, 1978, p. 3.

⁶⁵ NBC News/AP Poll, August 7-8, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

⁶⁶ NBC News/AP Poll, September 19-20, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

ratings also improved, though not nearly as much. This makes sense, because foreign policy is not the only important thing for which a President is thought to be responsible. Inflation, for instance, bedeviled Carter. In early August, three percent gave Carter an overall rating of “excellent” with 23% calling him “good.”⁶⁷ After Camp David, eight percent called him “excellent,” and 34% called him “good.”⁶⁸

What was the thinking that led the American people to elevate Carter in this manner? A look at some poll data more specific to Camp David offers some suggestions. Everyone recognized that Carter had accomplished something. Sixty-seven percent of Americans said that Carter played a “very important” role in getting Sadat and Begin to agree, with 25% saying he was merely “fairly important.”⁶⁹ Forty-seven percent of Americans said that Carter accomplished more than expected, while 36% said he accomplished what was expected – so he accomplished *something* in the mind of nearly everyone.⁷⁰ Finally, 65% of Americans felt that the summit improved chances for peace in the Middle East.⁷¹ Thus, there was a consensus in America that President Carter had *accomplished something and wrought a positive change* in the world.

Yet the picture was not as rosy for Carter as it may appear. Only 36% of Americans said that their opinion of President Carter became more favorable as a result of Camp David.⁷² This may have been an expression of the belief that ten percent better than garbage was still garbage, because only 31% of Americans felt that the agreements would lead to a lasting peace in the Middle East, while 42% did not.⁷³ Chances had

⁶⁷ NBC News/AP Poll, August 7-8, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

⁶⁸ NBC News/AP Poll, September 19-20, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

⁶⁹ Gallup Poll, September 19, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

⁷⁰ CBS News Poll, September 18, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

⁷¹ NBC News/AP Poll, September 19-20, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

⁷² Gallup Poll, September 19, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

⁷³ Gallup Poll, September 19, 1978, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

apparently improved, but not enough. Carter had wrought a positive change in the world, but not positive enough. Therefore, unless Carter proved the doubters wrong, his boost was destined to be short-lived.

Even so, Camp David improved Carter's stature considerably at exactly the right time. Just as the summit ended, *The New Republic* devoted a large part of an issue to Massachusetts Senator Ted Kennedy. Thanks to his name, he had an air of destiny about him. Kennedys, it seemed, were born to be president. As Carter had floundered in the polls, the visible, recognizable, northeastern and reliably liberal Kennedy became a popular alternative among some Democrats. The magazine gave Kennedy an editorial and two articles, one by Ken Bode about "Kennedy the Candidate," and another by Morton Kondracke, "Kennedy the President." The issue was dated September 23, which means it probably hit the newsstands around September 17, just as the Summit was ending. The editorial board was not particularly enamored with Kennedy. It praised him for "not joining, nor for a moment suggesting he would lead, the liberal retreat happening all around him," but it noted skepticism about his foreign policy, and credited much of his appeal to a President who appeared "to have made incompetence an art." It also expressed doubts about Kennedy's royalty ("One of the least attractive, least democratic features of a Kennedy presidency would be the return en masse of the extended family"), character ("The most curious feature of the present Kennedy boomlet is that it occurs at a time of self-conscious and self-righteous moralism in politics that logically should have precluded any broad-based interest in his candidacy"), and arrogance ("One suspects that

Edward Kennedy believes the intractables of history also will defer to him, that he will be able to impose himself on them, as Jack wanted to do, as he thought his heroes had").⁷⁴

Yet if such an editorial intended to throw cold water on the reader's Kennedy flame, the two articles that followed would have likely rekindled the embers. Kennedy was very well-positioned to make a run at the nomination, wrote Bode. Kennedy had a strong base in the Democratic Party that Jimmy Carter lacked, especially among groups key to Carter's 1976 campaign such as blacks. Kennedy needed only to continue doing what he was doing – he could wait until early 1980 to enter the race, perhaps the only Democratic candidate who could wait that long and stand a chance. It was clearly very possible for Kennedy to get the nomination, and he appeared to know how to get it.⁷⁵

For Kondracke, Kennedy may have been the "last chance for liberalism" and would certainly have been a better leader than Carter. Even Kennedy's critics, Kondracke argued, believed that "Kennedy knows where he wants to go and how he means to get there, even though he thinks the direction is wrong. This is a far cry from the impression that McGovern created in the 1972 election or that President Carter conveys now."

Kennedy was also an internationalist, an activist, a great legislator (a title neither of his brothers could claim), and a strong presence that would command loyalty (again, in a way President Carter did not). To the character question, Kondracke attempted to keep people from discounting Kennedy by noting, "Kennedy's character could affect the course of American history if he became president. Johnson's did. Nixon's did. We survived them both, and maybe Kennedy's flaws, whatever they are, should be discounted against his considerable merits. Fortunately, it's not something we have to

⁷⁴ "The Dynast," *The New Republic*, September 23, 1978, pp. 5-6.

⁷⁵ Ken Bode, "Kennedy the Candidate," *The New Republic*, September 23, 1978, pp. 6-12

decide today.”⁷⁶ No, it was not, and thanks to Camp David, the date of decision had been postponed a bit further still.

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In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas had attacked several towns, and Somoza had responded by declaring martial law.⁷⁷ In a moderate but real shift in U.S. policy, Ambassador Bill Jordan, emissary to Latin America, was authorized to “ask Latin American countries to join us in the mediation in Nicaragua. Jordan should tell the heads of state that the U.S. intends to respond positively to the call from the Nicaragua opposition for international mediation, and we would like for other Latin American nations to participate in this effort and name mediators.”⁷⁸

The United States had shifted from indirect to direct involvement, from the back to the front, from sparking to leading. In addition, the U.S. directly engaged two anti-Somoza governments – Bill Jordan visited Panamanian dictator Omar Torrijos, and Carter himself offered a message to Venezuelan President Carlos Andres Perez. This shift in policy brought immediate results. El Salvador, the Dominican Republic and Colombia quickly agreed to serve as mediators. Panama and Venezuela agreed not to intervene on behalf of the Sandinistas and instead give the mediation a chance to work. Former Secretary of State Bill Rogers agreed to serve as the U.S. mediator.⁷⁹

Carter had to have been pleased by these developments; there was little for him to do, so lack of additional direction in no way implies a lack of confidence. Interestingly, though, with the Nicaraguan crisis raging, Carter chose the civil war in Lebanon as the issue on which he would direct his team’s response. With elements in Israel pushing for

⁷⁶ Morton Kondracke, “Kennedy the President,” *The New Republic*, September 23, 1978, pp. 12-14

⁷⁷ “Revolution of the Scarves,” *TIME Magazine*, September 25, 1978, pp. 30-32.

⁷⁸ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Cyrus Vance, 9/19/78, “Meetings – SCC 105: 9/78” folder, Box 29, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁷⁹ Memos, Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 9/20/78 and 9/21/78, “State Department Evening Reports, 9/78” folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

that country's intervention, but the government holding back, Carter scrawled some very specific instructions on his State Department report:

"Consult directly with gov'ts of Syria (Cy), Israel, Egypt, France and Lebanon. Expedite. Then give me recommendation on what we can do to [?] through [?] to help resolve the Lebanon problem."⁸⁰

Such a request did not come out of nowhere, however. At Camp David, Anwar Sadat had inquired about what the United States had done to resolve the Lebanon situation, and Carter had been disappointed to have to tell him that "since direct American interest was aroused primarily in moments of crisis, we had not mounted a concerted effort to find a permanent solution to the continuing Lebanese tragedy."⁸¹ The Middle East remained a priority for Carter, and at the first chance he got, he ordered a deeper investigation into Lebanon.

On September 25, Somoza accepted mediation in Nicaragua, but with an unacceptable list of mediating countries and an objection to Bill Rogers as the U.S. mediator.⁸² Two days later, however, the parties had worked out an acceptable group of countries: El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Colombia and the United States. Carter expressly approved (though did not direct) this grouping. He also approved (though, again, did not direct) the decision of State to allow Somoza to have a veto over Rogers and find another mediator.⁸³

The Nicaraguan policy was running for the most part without Carter's aid, but he was still making small corrections to the heading. On September 28, Colombia accused

⁸⁰ Memo, Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 9/22/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 9/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library

⁸¹ Carter, 368-9

⁸² Memo, Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 9/25/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 9/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library

⁸³ Memo, Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 9/27/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 9/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

the Nicaraguan government of genocide, making them unacceptable to Somoza as a mediator. Carter implicitly warned State not to simply go ahead with the other three countries if they could not replace Colombia with Costa Rica to maintain a good democratic balance. In the end, Colombia was not replaced, El Salvador was dropped, and the mediators were the United States, the Dominican Republic and Guatemala.⁸⁴ The mediation could begin.

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There was another laborious process in which Carter had deeply involved himself for the previous year and a half. From day one of his Presidency, he had set about to reduce the nuclear threat. This was not a new effort; Richard Nixon had negotiated the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty in May of 1972. In November of 1974, Gerald Ford and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev met at Vladivostok to conduct what they thought would be work on SALT II; in the end, differences on issues of American cruise missiles and a Soviet bomber called Backfire doomed the Vladivostok talks to the mere status of interim agreements. The sides did agree to limits of 2,400 missiles, 1,320 of which could have multiple warheads.

In March of 1977, Carter sent Cyrus Vance to Moscow to propose, over the objections of both Vance and Brzezinski, much greater limitations. He sent an extension of the Vladivostok agreements in Vance's back pocket, but the point of the mission was to propose deep cuts. The proposal fostered Soviet enmity and distrust, and it would be two months before the sides met again. In the interim, a plan was conceived that rekindled negotiations. They would seek to conclude 1) a treaty that would last until 1985:

⁸⁴ Memo. Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 9/28/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 9/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

2) a protocol that would last three years; and 3) principles that would guide further talks and cuts in SALT III. This was something both sides could agree to, and in late September, they both agreed to upper limits of 2,250 total missiles, of which 1,250 could have multiple warheads. The sides also agreed in principle on the need for verification – although the methods involved in this would be one of the issues that would drag the negotiations out for nearly two more years.

The talks proceeded slowly; Vance met with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in May of 1978 in New York and in July in Geneva. Methods of verification remained a stumbling block, as did comprehensive test ban negotiations (which would eventually be shelved until after the completion of SALT II) and several more technical issues of treaty language. The old issues from Vladivostok, cruise missiles and Backfire, remained as well.⁸⁵

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Carter concluded September of 1978 by meeting with Gromyko on the month's final day. The previous day, Brzezinski had written to Carter a reminder to discuss the broader U.S.-Soviet relationship, especially issues such as Soviet attacks on the Camp David Accords and behavior in Africa. Carter underlined without comment the key words in this memo – he agreed that, as Brzezinski put it, “the U.S.-Soviet relationship is not immune [underlined by Carter] to events in key parts of the world.”⁸⁶ Yet when Carter sat down with Gromyko, he treated these issues with what he later called “requisite barbs”

⁸⁵ This account is from Carter, 212-230

⁸⁶ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #73,” 9/29/78, “[Weekly Reports to the President] 71-81” folder, Box 42, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

and “preliminaries.”⁸⁷ This corroborates the judgment of Brzezinski, who was sitting next to Carter, that the Americans were not strong enough in emphasizing the problems of Soviet conduct, while the Soviets were much stronger about what they saw as problems with American conduct (namely, a fear that the U.S. would excessively favor China).⁸⁸

Just a week before this meeting, Carter had reaffirmed his belief in SALT as the centerpiece of the U.S.-Soviet relationship, but this belief was a nuanced one. Carter’s affirmation came in response to a declaration of skepticism from Brzezinski:

“There is a tendency among some to present SALT as the centerpiece and the masterpiece of the US-Soviet relations. The implication is that US-Soviet relations will improve once SALT is signed...It is quite possible that we will get a good, or at least an acceptable, SALT agreement, and yet American-Soviet relations will continue to be rocky...Moreover, the strategic race will continue and in some respects perhaps accelerate. Thus a SALT agreement, though a useful and positive element in the US-Soviet relationship, is not likely to alter profoundly the nature of the US-Soviet relationship.”

Carter’s handwritten response at the end of the paragraph is, “I’m not sure about this – provided a summit meeting is held to conclude SALT II.”⁸⁹ Note that Carter placed particular importance not on the diplomatic agreement to adhere to a certain policy, but on the summit meeting. There are several plausible reasons for the importance of a summit meeting in Carter’s mind. One, which is the least revealing of Carter if true, is a “Camp David High.” Fresh off of his success at Camp David, in which his direct interactions with other leaders had led to great success, Carter was confident that he could work the same magic on Brezhnev if the two met face to face. The problem with

⁸⁷ Carter, 231

⁸⁸ Brzezinski, *Power and Principle*, 327

⁸⁹ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #72,” 9/22/78, [Weekly Reports to the President] 71-81” folder, Box 42, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

this reason is that it assumes that Camp David was an experience Carter wanted to repeat, and this was probably not the case. It had been very draining for the President.⁹⁰

More likely is that the importance placed on the summit was reflective of Carter's beliefs that predated Camp David. Carter had a certain expectation of Soviet behavior – cooperation without excessive competition or interference in the internal affairs of other nations. It would therefore be absurd to suggest that Carter did not care about the broader relationship. In light of these facts, the most plausible interpretation of the potential summit emerges: it would represent a forum to discuss the broader relationship on a leader-to-leader basis, not because of any “Camp David High” but because if nations were to act as humans, the best way to deal with another nation was to talk to the human in charge – a direct outgrowth of Carter's broader foreign policy worldview.

This Carter-Brzezinski exchange, then, is further evidence that the two men had more similar conceptions of Soviet policy than they are given credit for. The difference lay in their expectations of Soviet behavior – Brzezinski was very pessimistic, while Carter was more optimistic. His optimism was waning by the fall of 1978 (his words, after all, are “I'm not sure,” not “This is wrong”), but he still hoped a meeting with Brezhnev would lead to a transformation in U.S.-Soviet relations. Carter did not place his faith in arms limitation as such, but rather the dialogue about the broader relationship that it would foster. He did not, however, see a need to repeatedly go over that relationship with advisers when he had already publicly – and in his mind, quite clearly – communicated his vision of it, and the order of the day was the negotiation of a specific agreement.

⁹⁰ Carter, 406

To that end, the meeting produced its share of negotiation. As if Carter had not quibbled enough over the meanings of words at Camp David, he now had to consider questions such as what constituted a “new missile” and how to measure “range.” The meeting, however, was ultimately productive. The two sides agreed to conclude a SALT II agreement before a comprehensive test ban (CTB) agreement, and Gromkyo left the prospects for agreement better than he found them.

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On October 12, negotiations began in Washington to produce the promised Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty: failure there would remove much of Camp David’s luster. Egypt and Israel sent delegations to Washington to work with an American group headed by Vance, mostly in bilateral meetings. Both sides accepted the American proposal of a basic treaty text with details in annexes.⁹¹ The negotiations would continue for the rest of the month with Vance working full-time on them as much as possible. Carter met with the delegations personally only once, on October 17. Interestingly, given knowledge of how the talks would eventually turn out, it was the Israelis who looked better than the Egyptians on this day, as the Egyptians appeared to be dragging their feet on normalization while the Israelis felt it should be immediate upon withdrawal from the Sinai. Carter actually remarked that Israel had been more forthcoming than they had been at Camp David, while Egypt had been less.⁹²

⁹¹ Memo, Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 10/12/78, “State Department Evening Reports, 10/78” folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹² Memoranda of Conversation, “Summary of the President’s Meeting with the Israeli Delegation, October 17, 1978, 2:00-3:15, Oval Office” and “Summary of the President’s Meeting with the Egyptian Delegation, October 17, 1978, 3:50-5:10 p.m., Oval Office,” Serial Xs [9/78-12/78]” folder, Box 36, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

Despite Carter's smaller personal role, however, he kept a close watch on Vance and would sometimes issue strongly worded unprompted directions. On October 24, after reading Vance's account of his meeting with the Egyptians to discuss the treaty, Carter wrote in the margin. "Oppose strongly any changes in treaty text unless it is obvious that both sides agree to change" (emphasis in original).⁹³ On October 31, after reading that Vance expected to have a difficult task in his upcoming meeting with Begin, Carter wrote, "Cy, do not commit U.S. to any payments or other actions unless I specifically approve them."⁹⁴ Carter also repeatedly urged Vance to be firm in the negotiations. Furthermore, Carter almost never shared his State Department Evening Report with anyone else (except its author, who needed to see Carter's margin notes). One instance of this occurring was when the Report had an attachment that pertained to the Middle East. That attachment was the minutes of Senator Abe Ribicoff's conversations at the United Nations with Kuwaiti, Syrian and Lebanese Ambassadors about how the Palestinian question might be solved. Carter, always looking to solve the Middle East question, sent this to Brzezinski with the note, "Let's analyze this thoroughly."⁹⁵ Carter's conduct of these Middle Eastern negotiations was in contrast to the Nicaraguan mediation, in which Carter would sometimes raise points but would not exert the more direct control he exerted on the Middle East talks.

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⁹³ Memo, Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 10/24/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 10/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹⁴ Memo, Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 10/31/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 10/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹⁵ Memo, Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 12/20/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 12/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

On October 27, a significant shakeup occurred in Nicaragua. The Group of 12 (G12), a subcomponent of the FAO with close ties to the Sandinistas, had given up on the mediation effort, accusing the U.S. of merely wanting to save Somoza (which was absolutely false) and saying that the mediation effort would never remove Somoza (which turned out to be true). This, as Vance wrote to Carter, was both a blessing and a curse. While it would lessen the confidence of all involved in the mediation, it would make the remainder of the FAO more cohesive and better able to come to agreement. Nevertheless, the mediators once again had to engage in the process of simply sustaining the talks. However, they also received their first opportunity to mediate substantive negotiations. At the same time as the G12's departure, the FAO revealed their first proposal for Somoza's scrutiny, and real negotiations could begin. The proposal, however, among other things, called for a "prompt departure of Somoza."⁹⁶ On November 1, Carter finally got a chance to do something in Nicaragua – approve a demarche that would be delivered from Ambassador Bowdler to Somoza urging him to accept the FAO proposal. State Department officials, however, decided to delay the demarche when they learned that the Dominicans planned to deliver a similar message. As much as Carter currently had on his plate, the delay caught his attention, and he questioned it.⁹⁷ He did not, however, pursue the matter further. This speaks to Carter's willingness to allow the Nicaraguan mediation to proceed without his direct involvement. Other priorities made such direct involvement prohibitive.

⁹⁶ Memo, Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 10/27/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 10/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

⁹⁷ Memo, Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 11/1/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 11/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

The image of Carter as a weak non-leader is mistaken. He demonstrated tremendous drive and strength in those areas that he deemed to be direct Presidential responsibilities – the Middle East negotiations and SALT negotiations. His lack of attention to Nicaragua, even in a state of crisis, shows the extent of his prioritization of the other issues. The inattention was born of strength, not a lack of it. Yet despite the fact that Carter was a strong leader, he was not in control of his own party. At the mere midpoint of his term, many Democrats favored another candidate in the next election. These political factors certainly explain how an image of a weak Carter came about, despite its inaccuracy.

Chapter 3
“Break Another Promise Monday”
November 1978-February 1979

On Election Day, the Republicans gained just fifteen seats in the House, a significant victory for the Democrats (a minority party typically picks up a figure in the twenties), leaving what was nominally Carter’s party with a comfortable 277-158 majority. In the much more crucial Senate – for it is only that body which had the power to ratify treaties such as SALT – the Republicans gained three seats, leaving the Democrats with a 58-41 edge. Eight incumbent Democrats and five incumbent Republicans lost. Only about half of the candidates that Carter supported emerged victorious. Although the Democrats maintained a solid grip on power, Carter’s political difficulties meant such an arrangement offered little reason for optimism.

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The President, however, was most concerned with foreign policy, not electoral politics, and was quickly beginning to lose patience with the Arab-Israeli negotiations. This was primarily due to Israel, which was refusing to let its negotiators negotiate, but rather was insisting that each point be cleared in Jerusalem. Further and more importantly, Prime Minister Begin had recently announced the expansion of West Bank settlements – hardly a promising step toward granting autonomy to Palestinians in that land. Carter reacted harshly and tried to send a message by taking Vance off the case, as if to say that the United States would no longer make the Middle East negotiations a full-time job.⁹⁸ However, as Carter would soon discover, such actions hurt Egypt and the United States more than Israel, who did not really feel it needed a deal anyway. On November 16, Egyptian Vice President Hosni Mubarak visited in Washington and

⁹⁸ Carter, 409.

encapsulated the current state of Egypt. Carter was impressed with Mubarak, and about a week later, he sent Vance back to the Middle East to resume work on negotiations.⁹⁹

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With Carter's approval, the mediators in Nicaragua began to explore the possibility of a plebiscite on the question of Somoza's continued rule. The President had warned that the plebiscite had to be fair – a striking demonstration of an ability to point out the obvious.¹⁰⁰ Yet it was not to be. On November 27, both sides rejected the mediation team's version of a plebiscite.¹⁰¹ The FAO had its doubts that any plebiscite would be fair in Nicaragua; Somoza probably knew that if he met U.S. standards for fairness, he would lose. American mediator William Bowdler prepared to make a last-ditch effort to privately persuade both sides to accept the proposal, but the mediation effort was on life support.

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The Democratic Party midterm convention December 8-10 in Memphis delivered a mixed assessment of Jimmy Carter's late-1978 hold on his party. In essence, the party's liberal wing allowed Carter to have the floor for the first day – to give an anti-inflation speech that roused precisely no one – and then took over to voice its opposition to the President's spending choices. Carter's decision to impose an austerity program on the budget combined with his decision to raise defense spending in order to increase the odds of SALT ratification meant that social programs were in jeopardy. On the ninth, after

⁹⁹ Carter, 411.

¹⁰⁰ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Cyrus Vance, 11/14/78, "Nicaragua, 11/1-22/78" folder, Box 34, National Security Affairs, Staff Material – North/South, Pastor – Country File, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹⁰¹ Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 11/27/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 11/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

Carter left. Ted Kennedy arrived for a workshop on health care, and brought many delegates to their feet.

“The party that tore itself apart over Vietnam in the 1960s cannot afford to tear itself apart today over budget cuts in basic social programs...we cannot accept a policy that cuts spending to the bone in areas like jobs and health, but allows billions of dollars in wasteful spending for tax subsidies...and defense.”

Kennedy left after the workshop, leaving the remaining delegates to fight over policy resolutions on the convention’s final day. The chief lightning rod was a push for a resolution led by United Auto Workers leader Douglas Fraser that would have called for Carter “not to make any cuts at all in social programs in the new budget.” After some intense lobbying by the Administration, the resolution was defeated 822-521, hardly a strong, unified show of support for the President.¹⁰²

Carter got his chance to reply to Kennedy’s criticisms at his December 12 press conference. His response was politeness through gritted teeth. Carter explained that as President, he had “to look at a much broader range of issues than [did] Senator Kennedy.” Further, Carter pointed out the “special aura of appreciation” attached to Kennedy “because of the position of his family in our Nation and in our party. This makes him a spokesman, not only in his own right but also over a much broader and expected constituency.” Carter noted, however, that “this is a healthy situation,” and reaffirmed that “the differences between me and Senator Kennedy are very minor.”¹⁰³ Carter remained relatively calm under the pressure, though he was not above reminding Kennedy of the sheer scope of his duties as President.

¹⁰² Dennis A. Williams, James Doyle, Tony Fuller, John Walcott and Eleanor Clift, “Jimmy vs. The Liberals,” 12/18/78, *Newsweek*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁰³ “The President’s News Conference of December 12, 1978,” 12/12/78, American Presidency Project.

Two days later, in an interview with Barbara Walters, Carter defended his economic policy very simply: “The most heavy burden of inflation falls on those who are disadvantaged, the retired person on a fixed income, the poor person who has maybe one job capability and cannot move about, the family that spends almost all of their income on the necessities of life...the best thing that I can do for the poor and disadvantaged is to keep the social programs at a constant level or perhaps from modification to make them more efficient, on the one hand, and control the inflationary burden which falls most heavily on them.”¹⁰⁴

This was probably what the country wanted. It was probably even what mainstream Democrats wanted. Certainly, *The New Republic*'s TRB was very protective of Carter. He followed the line treaded by the editors in arguing that the “real adversary was not Carter but Congress: Congress and the conservative mood of the country.”¹⁰⁵ He did not want Ted Kennedy to run for President, declaring that “if the Democrats drop Carter it will be an acknowledgment of abysmal failure – just made for Ronald Reagan.” Even in the non-elite circle of public opinion, the President remained within striking distance of Kennedy, with the Senator holding a 52-42 lead in late December polls.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, in late 1978, while the split in the Democratic Party was very real, many still regarded the prospect of a serious challenge to Carter as a pipe dream. One delegate told *U.S. News and World Report* that “Reporters dream up most of the stuff about challenges. It's difficult to beat the person who holds the office.” California state chairman Bert Coffey was quoted as saying that although California Governor Jerry “Brown has

¹⁰⁴ “Interview with the President and Mrs. Carter. Question-and-Answer Session with Barbara Walters of the American Broadcasting Company,” 12/14/78. American Presidency Project.

¹⁰⁵ “Memphis Blues,” *The New Republic*, December 23 & 30, 1978, p. 2.

¹⁰⁶ ABC News/Harris Survey, 12/21-12/26/78. Roper Center iPoll Database.

presidential ambitions. I don't see him trying it." Even Ted Kennedy's statements in support of Carter-in-80 were taken seriously, although there was speculation that his position could be overtaken by events.¹⁰⁷ Ken Bode wrote that even if Kennedy wanted the Presidency – and want it he might, having recently hired seasoned political organizer Carl Wagner, ostensibly as "liaison with unions and public officials" – it did not serve his purposes to divide the Democrats yet.¹⁰⁸ The end verdict on the convention was mixed – one article concluded that "Memphis suggests that a President doesn't have to be loved by his party to be in control of it – and that he is prepared for now to take the political fire from the Democratic left in his war on inflation."¹⁰⁹ Another concluded that "The President – convinced that he is tune with mainstream America – will continue trying to move the Democratic Party toward the right through an increasing emphasis on careful government spending and limited program. Overall, it is a much more confident Jimmy Carter going into 1979 than the President of a year ago. Meeting his goals, however, will depend heavily on how well he can master Congress."¹¹⁰ Mastering Congress would be difficult if he could not master his party. For all of Carter's decisiveness, the simple philosophical divide could make him look very weak.

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As the Democrats were meeting in Memphis, face-to-face negotiations were beginning in Nicaragua for the first time. The mediation team had revised its plebiscite proposal: both sides had agreed to negotiate together, but with a proviso. The FAO

¹⁰⁷ "Can Carter Keep His Grip on Democrats?" 12/11/78, *U.S. News and World Report*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁰⁸ Ken Bode, "Miniconvention," *The New Republic*, December 23 & 30, 1978, pp. 13-15.

¹⁰⁹ Dennis A. Williams, James Doyle, Tony Fuller, John Walcott and Eleanor Clift, "Jimmy vs. The Liberals," 12/18/78, *Newsweek*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹¹⁰ "Carter-Can He Tame Congress? 12/25/78, *U.S. News and World Report*, from LexisNexis Academic.

refused to discuss the plebiscite specifically until Somoza had granted amnesty, pardoned political prisoners and lifted press censorship. Somoza was willing to discuss these matters, as that was probably preferable to a breakdown in the talks. Rather than wrap up the negotiations, the sides continued to drag their feet by establishing working groups to implement the pardons and the lifting of censorship.¹¹¹ Essentially, the mediation had returned to the “preliminary” stage, in which the substantive discussions were on hold while preliminary matters were negotiated. This cannot have pleased Carter – but once again, he had more pressing things to worry about.

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On December 19, with Vance preparing to leave for Geneva to conduct another round of SALT negotiations, Carter held a 45 minute consultative meeting with the Joint Chiefs to discuss what the United States position should be on cruise missile restrictions. These types of meetings were extremely important; the support of men like the Joint Chiefs, well respected as experts in defense, would be key to obtaining SALT’s ratification. The President cogently – if stubbornly – argued that restricting both nuclear and conventional warheads on cruise missiles would be easier to verify, and, in light of the high cost of cruise missiles and the unlikelihood of ever actually arming a cruise missile with a conventional warhead, should be acceptable to the United States; the Chiefs expressed concern about the precedent set by limiting conventional weapons at all. Carter posed the point that it may be hard to stomach the Soviets arming their Backfire

¹¹¹ Memo, Warren Christopher to Jimmy Carter, 12/9/78, “State Department Evening Reports, 12/78” file, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

bombers with warheads that they *claimed* to be non-nuclear.¹¹² Carter showed a solid grasp of the treaty's details, an ability to discuss it with experts in the field, and awareness of the political dimension of the treaty. Carter had invested the time to learn the material and the time to discuss it because of the sheer importance he placed on it.

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Sometimes, the way to get a neglectful captain's attention is to do something outrageous. William Bowdler did exactly that on December 30, submitting a draft copy of the mediation team's response to President Somoza's self-proclaimed final proposal. As Vance recognized independently of Carter, the response was clearly unacceptable. It was written as "the emotional response of three individuals who appear to be taking sides."¹¹³ The mediation team, in no uncertain terms, declared Somoza's proposal to be unacceptable. They were frustrated, as they believed (correctly) that Somoza felt he had "weathered the storm and was prepared to dispense with the mediation." But Carter marked up their message to a greater degree than he had marked up any Nicaragua-related document to that point. The mediators wanted the "organization, control and supervision of the entire plebiscite by an International Authority;" Carter called this "an excessive demand." He questioned the mediators' reference to what "the opposition believes" about voter registration and what would, "in the view of many Nicaraguans, work against the achievement of an appropriate atmosphere for the plebiscite." Interestingly, though, this same document that shows Carter's moment of increased involvement and responsiveness to wandering underlings highlights his lack of

¹¹² Memorandum for the Record, "Summary of the Meeting Between the President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff on SALT TWO and the FY 80 Defense Program," 12/19/78, "Serial Xs - [9/78-12/78]" folder, Box 36, Donated Historical Material - Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹¹³ Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 12/30/78, "State Department Evening Reports, 12/78" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

involvement to that point. Where the mediators note that Somoza's phrasing of the plebiscite question "may...not be understood by large segments of the electorate," Carter wrote that such a problem "should be reparable." Carter seemed not to realize that the opposition was nearly as hard to satisfy as Somoza. What was acceptable to one was unacceptable to the other. Also, Carter had to ask Brzezinski for clarification on what the mediators' proposal of December 20 had been.¹¹⁴

On January 12, the mediators presented the sides with a revised plebiscite proposal. They were to make one final attempt before conceding the mediation to be a failure. The proposal heeded Carter's suggestion that an outside plebiscite authority was excessive and called for a national plebiscite authority. The opposition privately informed the mediators that they would accept the plan if Somoza did, putting the onus for a potential failure on Somoza.

Somoza refused to make a decision on the spot, but he left no doubt as to what his decision would be. He confidently pronounced that most Nicaraguans were comfortable with the country as it had been and that he did not fear polarization. He also did not fear the United States, which he noted was always threatening him. The mediators were able to read the writing on the wall, perceiving and reporting that Somoza welcomed polarization, because it would force a choice between him and communism. The mediation effort was clearly over.¹¹⁵

On January 26, Warren Christopher chaired a Policy Review Committee meeting to determine the American course of action. Carter approved the PRC's decision to

¹¹⁴ Untitled, undated document, "Nicaragua, 12/1-20/78," folder, Box 34, Office of the National Security Advisor, Staff Files, North/South, Pastor-Country File, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹¹⁵ Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, 1/13/79, "State Department Evening Reports, 1/79" folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

withdraw the Peace Corps and U.S. Military Group as well as to terminate military assistance.¹¹⁶

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Yet even as the mediation finally ended, Carter had more important matters to consider. The beginning of the new year marks budget season, and the budget is an intersection between foreign and domestic policy. It is also an entirely executive document, undirtied by legislative hands. If Carter proposed a cut or hike somewhere in his budget, there was no way to blame Congress for making that cut or hike. Carter created his 1980 fiscal year budget with two priorities in mind: fight inflation and win SALT ratification. The result was a budget unacceptable to liberals. Ken Bode in *The New Republic* emphasized broken promises. The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act had its funding slashed by half, while Carter's promise book had pledged to raise its funding. At Memphis, Carter had pledged to be as fair as possible, and "if I do make a mistake, it will be on the side of those most dependent on government, the poor and the deprived and the disadvantaged." Bode disagreed. "The Carter budget now doesn't meet that guarantee. Instead, the budget emphasizes a redirection of democratic goals." Social programs did not have to be squeezed out; there were choices available to Carter, and he made the wrong ones. "President Carter," wrote Bode, "has consciously begun to move the Democratic party away from nearly half a century of its own history." Yet the most damning criticism of Carter was yet to come. This policy of Carter's, said the next paragraph, was "completely in step with what has emerged as the president's personal philosophy...he is more like a Republican than a Democrat." As a consequence,

¹¹⁶ "Policy Review Committee Meeting, Summary of Conclusions" 1/26/79, "Meetings-PRC 89: 1/26/79" folder, Box 25, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

“it is time for the Democratic Party to take a hard look at Jimmy Carter.” He was no longer an untested commodity, and no President, after Watergate, had a divine right to renomination.¹¹⁷

A key premise of Bode’s criticism was flawed. Carter did not have much in the way of choices. He realized, well before many other Democrats did, that he could not “have it all.” On the issue of SALT ratification, Carter was more pliable and more political than other Democrats. This was simply a product of being very goal-oriented on the SALT issue and being determined to do what it took to secure ratification. He knew that the price of ratification would be a pound of flesh from the defense budget, and he was willing to pay it.¹¹⁸ People like Bode believed that the President should be able to will SALT through Congress without raising defense spending, leaving more money available for liberal programs. If defense spending were to rise, however, other programs would have to be cut in order to fight inflation. The Bode piece shows that Carter’s SALT priority was out of step with (indeed, unrecognized by) his party, which prioritized Great Society-era programs. This is particularly noteworthy because most liberals supported SALT – but were unwilling to take the necessary steps to secure its ratification.

The article was written by Bode, not *The New Republic* editors. The editors, however, picked the magazine cover. That cover depicted a photo of Carter kissing Coretta Scott King, with a choir and Rosalyn looking on. The words were a new twist on a Porter Grainger and Everett Robbins song: “If I go to church on Sunday, Break another promise Monday, ‘T ain’t nobody’s business if I do” (the irony is palpable – the song is

¹¹⁷ Ken Bode, “Carter’s Chosen Path,” *The New Republic*, January 27, 1979, pp. 12-14.

¹¹⁸ Memo, Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #79,” 11/9/78, “Weekly Reports [to the President] 71-81” folder, Box 42, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

one of defiance, refusal to submit to the judgments of others – a far cry from being a “the most dedicated poll-watchers in the history of the Oval Office” as Bode wrote).¹¹⁹ The cover accused Carter of breaking promises and endorsed the Bode article. It reflected a continuation of the personal element of Carter criticism. Carter’s openness about religion opened him up to religiously-themed criticism – he was guilty of not merely promise-breaking, but hypocrisy, being more Republican than Democrat. Carter’s support in his own party was clearly falling, and falling fast.

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Carter had to establish political momentum somewhere. His foreign policy advisers, naturally enough, looked for ways to establish this momentum with new foreign policy achievements. The Camp David goodwill having largely dissipated, Cyrus Vance took an implicitly political line in writing that successful resolution of three of the four issues of Chinese normalization, SALT II, Egyptian-Israeli peace and the Tokyo round of trade talks would be an historic achievement for the Administration.¹²⁰ Brzezinski explicitly sought to consider what would be Carter’s most prominent foreign policy achievements *in 1980* which would help him in the elections of that year.¹²¹

The two men registered minor disagreement on SALT. While Vance considered it as part of the pantheon of would-be historic achievements, Brzezinski was much more muted about its political effects. He felt that the ratification fight would kill the momentum of the treaty by the time 1980 rolled around, and Carter needed to focus on

¹¹⁹ *The New Republic*, January 27, 1979, cover

¹²⁰ Memo, Cyrus Vance to Jimmy Carter, undated, “Priorities for 1979-80,” “State Department Evening Reports, 1/79” folder, Box 39, Plains File, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹²¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “NSC Weekly Report #86,” 1/26/79, “Weekly Reports [to the President] 82-90” folder, Box 42, Donated Historical Materials – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

more sustainable achievements. Yet this disagreement should not be overemphasized. Brzezinski's treatment took the *achievement* of the treaty as a given – without a doubt, failure to conclude it would be politically disastrous. That point, however, came with a *but* – the political momentum of the treaty would not be sustainable and Carter needed to find other achievements to help him win re-election. It was simply tails to Vance's heads.

Moreover, the two men were in perfect agreement on the importance of achieving a resolution in the Middle East. Vance, who placed several foreign policy issues in order of importance, placed the Middle East number one on his list because it would “solidify perceptions of [Carter's] foreign policy leadership.” Carter actually disagreed with Vance's putting the Middle East at #1, thinking that should be U.S.-Soviet relations. He did, however, express agreement with the general analysis. Brzezinski identified the Middle East as one of the two main areas where Carter could produce a politically sustainable achievement. He felt that only the conclusion of the negotiations would allay the suspicion of the Jewish community: to that end, Carter should make a strong push for the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty and then disengage himself from the negotiations on the West Bank and Gaza.

Brzezinski's other main prescription for Carter was to successfully manage U.S.-Soviet-Chinese relations. Means to this goal included visits to both countries and more direct Presidential control over statements about the Soviet Union. Vance, for his part, put U.S.-Soviet relations as his second priority, prescribing a careful balance between Moscow and Peking with no tilt one way or the other. As for Nicaragua, Vance listed it in the second cluster of issues, as an “important issue.” Success on these would be nice but they were not critical. Vance's analysis noted that it was important to the region – a

moderate solution in Nicaragua would lead to moderate solutions in other Central American countries.

Thus, these documents were quite non-revolutionary in terms of what goals they advocated; management of the Middle East and the Soviet relationship were already Carter's priorities. Their articulation of the idea that Carter's priorities would be great politics is not particularly notable either; Carter did not choose his priorities for political reasons. Rather, they were outgrowths of his broader foreign policy vision. What is most notable here is the perception of the political situation in which new momentum was needed. Politics would not shape what Carter's priorities were or even how determined he was to pursue them. Carter would certainly not back off from SALT because it may only a temporary political benefit. That does not render it less important to understand the political context in which Carter worked. It was shaping the perception of Carter. Everything he did was being viewed by many with a jaded eye.

One such thing was a speech about foreign affairs at Georgia Tech on February 20.¹²² Carter opened his speech with a discussion of the general state of the world. It was one of "danger," he said, "a world in which democracy and freedom are still challenged, a world in which peace must be rewon day by day." Yet Carter defined peace in a particular way that is reflective of his worldview. "Too many people still lack the simplest necessities of life," he continued, "and too many are deprived of the most basic human rights." These were, of course, the most pressing problems of the world, as Carter saw it.

¹²² "Atlanta, Georgia Remarks at a Special Convocation of the Georgia Institute of Technology," 2/20/79, American Presidency Project.

He also pointed out both the inevitability and the dangers of change. "The United States cannot control events within other nations," he said. "A few years ago, we tried this and we failed." Yet Carter also realized that there was a "darker side of change when countries in turbulence provide opportunities for exploitation by outsiders who seek not to advance human aims, but rather to extend their own power and their own position at the expense of others." This shows Carter's growing pessimism about the Soviet Union. While Carter had entered office expecting the Soviets to behave in a certain way, he was by now seriously doubting whether they were prepared to conform to his expectation of behavior after all. What it does not show is any inconsistency in Carter's thinking. Although it is a more hawkish comment next to other more dovish comments, Carter saw no inconsistency in combining the pursuit of moral goals or nonintervention with a Soviet policy containing elements of competition, or with suitable reaction if that competition became excessive.

Focusing on the United States, Carter argued that "if we are to meet our responsibilities, we must continue to maintain the military forces we need for our defense and to contribute to the defense of our allies." The increase in the defense budget was needed to ensure that America could "back up those commitments with military strength." These comments, coming just before a discussion of SALT II, were, on the one hand, to cushion the blow among hawks of the SALT discussion. Carter meant to argue that he understood the importance of conventional forces. On the other hand, these same comments were to convince the doves of just that importance.

Carter then discussed the terms of the nearly complete treaty. It would require the dismantling of ten percent of Soviet strategic forces while allowing the U.S. to build

more. It would keep the Soviets from increasing the size of their land based missiles while allowing the U.S. to pursue the MX, Trident and other defense initiatives. Carter was emphasizing the hawkish component of the treaty – it would help the United States and hurt the Soviet Union. However, he then had to soften the blow of that hawkishness for the doves. He reaffirmed the mixture of cooperation and competition, saying that “it is precisely because we have fundamental differences with the Soviet Union that we are determined to bring this dangerous dimension [strategic competition] of our military competition under control.” The treaty would preserve peace. These were two sides of the same coin in Carter’s mind, but he was talking to people who only saw one side.

This speech was not well-received. Afterwards, only 34% of the nation felt that the United States could do little or nothing to control events abroad; 60% disagreed.¹²³ The most notable editorial did not treat the speech as its centerpiece, but rather dealt with the overall attitude of “restraint” which the speech promoted, but hardly unveiled. The piece, by conservative columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, was not overly critical of Carter, but did have a tone of concern. “Apart from morale,” they wrote. “a president who predictably will turn the other cheek – for reasons of theology, policy or both – makes life more certain for the gentlemen in the Kremlin.” They did not have to fear a strong American reaction.¹²⁴ Carter was simply unable to argue his critics into accepting his idea that reciprocal restraint was both possible and a good thing.

From the hawkish liberal side, the editorial page of *The New Republic* was sharply critical of the President. It called the Georgia Tech speech “an all-too-typical Carter performance. Confronted with evidence of Soviet preparations for misbehavior, the

¹²³ Campaign Financing and Other Issues poll, 3/5/79-3/17/79, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

¹²⁴ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. “Watchword at the White House – Restraint.” 2/21/79, *Washington Post*, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

president apparently could think up nothing better to do than issue a public statement.” Nations, terrorists and cartels “have been competing with each other to use the United States as a doormat...President Carter is developing a reputation for ineptitude which, unless it is reversed, will cause his defeat next year or, if he somehow achieves reelection, should cause Americans to quake for their country’s future until the year 1985.” These were harsh words indeed. Observers saw the elements of Carter’s policy with which they disagreed – in this case, seeing restraint with no credit to defense buildup. Yet the magazine was skeptical that Republicans could do any better. “If ‘linkage’ is going to be the sum and substance of Republican foreign policy for 1980 and after,” the editors wrote, “it shows that we can expect as little imagination from the GOP in that field as we have come to expect from it over the years in domestic affairs.”¹²⁵ Four more years of Carter would be a nightmare, but four years of Republican rule might also. Was this the groundwork for a shift into the pro-Kennedy camp? The Senator was never mentioned, and given that the magazine had long been much more skeptical of Kennedy’s foreign policy than his domestic policy, there is reason to dismiss this speculation. Perhaps an opening for Kennedy was emerging in the eyes of previous skeptics in the form of “anyone but Carter” theory, and it was an opening that Carter would have to close.

Instead, the opening was widening. Carter was being done in by foreign and domestic affairs. The competence question, seemingly defused after Camp David, was resurfacing. The United States appeared weak abroad. A SALT II Treaty and an Egypt-

¹²⁵ “What in the World to Do?” *The New Republic*, March 5, 1979, pp. 5-8.

Israeli Peace Treaty (which, according to the Camp David Accords, was supposed to have been signed by December 17) were still out of reach.¹²⁶

Republicans and Democrats alike were licking their chops. Media speculation about a possible Ted Kennedy candidacy appeared frequently. Three major unions – construction, government employees and machinists – publicly announced their intention to support a candidate other than Carter.¹²⁷ The NAACP threatened to do so unless Carter did more for the urban poor.¹²⁸ Kennedy had widened the poll gap considerably, opening up a 55-30 lead over the incumbent, returning to his pre-Camp David margin (he had led 56-31 in August).¹²⁹ Carter desperately needed an achievement.

Yet SALT negotiations were grinding to a halt. After his speech, Carter met with Dobrynin and made clear to him that *both* the U.S. and the Soviet Union needed to take action to get the SALT negotiations back on track. Just a few days later President Brezhnev delivered a strong public endorsement to the talks. Over the course of the month of March, the two sides would agree on encoding of missile data – with the Soviets agreeing to its prohibition, allowing the U.S. to ensure compliance – and the definition of a “new weapon” – a five percent change in an existing weapon. Perhaps SALT II was moving closer to completion – that would be good news, but it would not be enough unless it was actually finished.

Carter’s political difficulties were self-perpetuating. His severely weakened political position and increased isolation caused his movements and statements to be seen

¹²⁶ Ephraim Lewis, “A Threat to Carter’s Renomination,” 2/26/79, *Business Week*, from LexisNexis Academic; “President Under Siege,” 3/5/79, *U.S. News and World Report*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ “Too lame a horse for 1980?” 3/10/79. *The Economist*. From LexisNexis Academic.

¹²⁹ Gallup Poll, 2/23/79-2/26/79, Roper Center iPoll Database; Time/Yankelovich, Skelly and White Poll, 8/78, Roper Center iPoll Database.

in the most unfavorable light, rather than in their required complexity. This weakening was in significant part a product of Carter's already existing isolation from liberal elements of his party. Carter was among the first Democrats to realize that ratifying SALT with the mood of the country as it was required an increase in the defense budget. Therefore, social problems had to be cut somewhere. In all these problems, however, Carter's pursuit of his priorities never wavered. He may have been partly sustained by hope that an achievement would get him a more fair hearing before the public and the media.

Chapter 4
“As much as anything else in the world”
March – May, 1979

With SALT showing signs of life but still unfinished, Carter hoped the newly redoubled Middle Eastern negotiations, which brought delegations of Israelis and Egyptians (but not the heads of state) to Camp David with Vance in late February, would bear fruit. Yet it quickly became clear that progress would be problematic. While the Egyptian delegation was authorized to conduct substantive negotiations, the Israeli delegation was not. Their charge was merely exploratory, and they were to report back to Tel Aviv. The Americans quickly tried to persuade Begin to come so that real negotiations could take place, yet the Prime Minister devised one excuse after another to avoid joining the negotiations. Greatly annoyed, Carter asked Begin to visit Washington instead, and Begin agreed to visit there on March 1.¹³⁰

The meeting was extremely disappointing. Begin was still inflexible, still not forward-thinking and still not recognizing Egypt's concessions. He was in no mood to make progress. Carter interpreted Begin's remarks as an attempt to convince him that Israel should be the dominant military power in the Middle East and would suffice as the United States' greatest ally there. Carter tried to remind Begin of the benefits that would accrue to Israel by strengthening its relationships with other countries and the dangers of becoming isolated in a world where the United States was Israel's only friend. Nonetheless, as Carter stood alone on a White House balcony that late winter's night, he truly began to feel that the peace effort may be at an end.

After coming inside, Carter conceived the idea of one last, desperate stroke – a trip to the Middle East. He broached the subject with his advisers, who were divided.

¹³⁰ This entire account is from Carter, 412-429.

Most strongly in the President's corner was Brzezinski. This should not have been surprising, as the National Security Adviser had long advocated decisive Presidential action designed to bring the negotiations to a close. Most concerned was Jody Powell – understandably, since as Press Secretary, he would be the one in the line of fire if the trip turned out to be a political disaster. But Vice President Walter Mondale was very skeptical as well. Almost all of the goodwill that the President had enjoyed after the Camp David Accords was gone. A trip would dramatize what already appeared to be a failure. With his advisers divided, the decision was Carter's. He probably felt that he had nothing to lose, but still needed to find out if he had *anything* to gain.

While debating whether or not to make a trip, Carter and Begin were able to work out a treaty text that Begin found acceptable. Carter was unenthusiastic about this development. He knew that it would require Sadat to show flexibility and he would not be eager to accept it. He also knew that the treaty text was only a small portion of the problem. Nevertheless, when Sadat reacted positively to the possibility of a visit, Carter made his final decision to go.

While Carter made rapid preparations for the trip, during which Mondale would stay in Washington to run the government, Brzezinski ran ahead of him and presented the Treaty to Sadat in Cairo. When Carter arrived on March 8, Sadat informed Carter that the treaty was basically acceptable. The visit was off to a good start. As the men discussed how the details might be worked out, Carter felt extremely confident of success. The despondent mood of a few days before must have now seemed to be other side of the world.

Carter's good feelings were short-lived. After arriving in Tel Aviv March 10, Carter dined at the Begin home, where the Prime Minister told the President that he would not sign any treaty during this visit. He would only submit one to the cabinet and the Knesset and let them have an extended debate before he would do anything. Carter was stunned.

"I couldn't believe it. I stood up and asked him if it was necessary for me to stay any longer. We then spent about 45 minutes on our feet in his study. I asked him if he actually wanted a peace treaty, because my impression was that everything he could do to obstruct it, he did with apparent relish. He came right up and looked into my eyes about a foot away and said it was obvious from the expression on his face that he wanted peace as much as anything else in the world. It was almost midnight when I left. We had an extremely unsatisfactory meeting, equivalent to what we'd had the previous Saturday night at the White House."¹³¹

Carter's response to this was to preside over an Israeli cabinet meeting the next day to try to appeal to others more flexible than Begin. The President and his advisers continued that strategy over the next couple of days, repeatedly meeting with the cabinet, the Knesset and its committees. Though many of the Israelis the Americans met expressed their hope for peace, little progress was ultimately made. Carter made plans to depart Israel after a farewell breakfast with Begin on the morning of March 13.

As Carter prepared to face failure, he had to be pained by what appeared to be strong support for the Treaty on the part of the Israeli cabinet. That, at least, was the impression the Americans had acquired from their discussions. Partly in response to this consideration, Carter made one final strong push at the breakfast meeting. His last gasp was to offer to delete language referring to Gaza, allowing Begin to claim some semblance of victory. Dayan, who was also present for this session, reacted favorably. Perhaps finally sensing what everyone else already knew about his being the final

¹³¹ Carter, 421

holdout. Begin agreed to the deal. What had seemed so impossible 12 hours before was now a reality. Peace was indeed at hand. When Carter arrived back in Cairo, informed Sadat of the revised deal and obtained his agreement, peace was attained. When the Treaty was signed in Washington two weeks later, on March 26, peace was enshrined for the entire world to see.¹³²

Like at Camp David, Carter had regained some support at home with a diplomatic achievement. Yet the cartoon accompanying the *New Republic* article was much more positive to Carter than the Camp David cartoon. It featured Carter in the foreground (older, in a suit, carrying a briefcase), several Arabs in the background (labeled “Syria,” “Iraq” and “Libya”) jumping up and down and clutching their heads in anger. The caption read “Alarm – Peace threat in the Mid–East!”¹³³ Carter had clearly accomplished something in what might be mildly termed an unsympathetic context.

Yet there was something different from Camp David. This time, there would be no new beginning. Rumblings about an alternative candidate were not new – they had appeared in September. This time, however, they were more concrete, more supportive of the alternative. The March 31 *New Republic*, representing mainstream liberals, continued the trend that had begun in January, coinciding with the arrival of the new Congress and the proposal of the new budget. The editorial board expressed its displeasure with Carter: “In fact, we think the general proposition that things as they are deserve no innate advantage [which Carter had offered relating to budgetary matters and cuts] should be applied to other aspects of public life besides the federal budget. Politics, for example. We think that President Carter does not have any preemptive right to renomination by the Democratic party simply because he is the Democratic incumbent.”

¹³² Carter, 423–426

¹³³ Cartoon. *The New Republic*. March 24, 1979, p. 6.

Now, the editors agreed with the TRB that the current age would be tough for anyone to handle – alluding to the lack of anyone who they were certain could “do much better in these awful times” – but they did invite anyone who wished to challenge Carter – explicitly including Edward Kennedy. “Kennedy has eloquently formulated the traditional liberal critique of Carter’s domestic program,” wrote the editors, although “on foreign policy, Kennedy [was] no less confusing and disheartening than the incumbent.” They did not say Kennedy was worse – indeed, based on their previous writings, one wonders if they could argue that *anyone* was worse – so on balance, a reader could deduce from this that Kennedy would be the better candidate, though nothing of the sort was stated explicitly. The editors called Kennedy to the bell:

“Kennedy has a special role in the Democratic party, and a special responsibility. He owes it to the party, and to the liberal values he supports, to make his intentions absolutely clear one way or the other. Only then can Democrats start from zero and measure their candidates against their values.”¹³⁴

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Kennedy had no intention of clarifying his designs or of stepping aside. As the International Monetary Fund prepared to approve its \$40 million loan to Nicaragua in May, Kennedy took the opportunity to urge that the U.S. oppose the loan because it would merely prolong the crisis.¹³⁵ He knew he had the standing to talk – an April Gallup poll on who between them should receive the Democratic nomination had him leading Carter 50-32.¹³⁶ Such things are very important to a President’s foreign policy. A President in domestic political trouble does not have political capital to use on foreign

¹³⁴ “Zero-Based Politics,” *The New Republic*, March 31, 1979, pp. 5-6.

¹³⁵ Karen DeYoung, “Nicaragua Expected to Win IMF Loan,” 5/11/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

¹³⁶ Gallup Poll, 4/6-9/79, Roper Center iPoll Database.

policy and does not get the benefit of the doubt when he makes a foreign policy move with which some disagree.

And it was domestic policy that was Kennedy's primary battleground. He coupled his attack on Nicaraguan policy with an assault on Carter's energy policy. Carter's latest initiative in his moral equivalent of war was price decontrol, designed to raise prices to encourage a decrease in consumption. To keep this from being nothing but a coup for the oil companies, the decontrol would be coupled with a windfall profits tax, allowing the oil companies to keep only a portion of the increased revenue they derived from decontrol.

Such was not good enough for Kennedy. In a speech before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Kennedy declared.

"The overbearing power of the oil lobby has...intimidated the administration into throwing in the towel without even entering the ring on the issue of oil price decontrol...It has also intimidated the administration into submitting a token windfall tax that is no more than a transparent fig leaf over the vast new profits the oil industry will reap."¹³⁷

In his news conference afterward, Carter responded, "That's just a lot of baloney."¹³⁸

Carter immediately backtracked, going on to say that he believed Kennedy's words must have been taken out of context, and he would welcome any proposals from the Senator. But sometimes, visceral reactions are the most indicative of one's true feelings, and perhaps justifiably, the "baloney" quote got most of the attention. Adam Clymer's column in the *New York Times* placed "spending and priorities...at the heart of the Carter-Kennedy dispute" and pointed out the Senator's twin purposes: running for

¹³⁷ Martin Schram. "Kennedy's Intensified Rhetoric Fuels '80 Speculation." 6/11/79. *Washington Post*. from LexisNexis Academic.

¹³⁸ "The President's News Conference of April 30, 1979," The American Presidency Project

President and forcing Carter to consider Kennedy's wing of the Democratic Party. Yet Clymer also pointed out that Carter "could never satisfy and silence Mr. Kennedy."¹³⁹ The President, therefore, was doomed to stay under relentless attack from his own party. *Newsweek* magazine used the event as a lead-in to a 1400-word story entitled "Jimmy versus Teddy" that described Kennedy's speech as having "a certain ring of the Restoration about it. The senator painted the American present as a passage of 'reaction' and 'drift' and called for 'a time of new action and inspiration' comparable to the dawning of the 1960s. He did not blame Carter for the malaise of 1979 or remind his listeners that his brother John had staked out that lost New Frontier in 1961. Being the Last Kennedy, he did not need to."¹⁴⁰

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Even dead man's hand, however, contains a pair of aces.¹⁴¹ Carter was once again able to produce a glorious achievement as the walls of Camelot closed in around him. On May 9, Cyrus Vance stepped before the cameras and announced to the nation that the essence of SALT II had been completed, calling it "an essential step toward a safer America and a safer world." There would be a summit meeting in about a month's time, at which the Treaty would be signed. There were some technical details that remained to be worked out in the interim, but the basic agreement had been reached.

The message to the public delivered by the Beltway media, however, suggested that Brzezinski may have had the most accurate political appraisal of the treaty. The

¹³⁹ Adam Clymer, "Baloney's a Fighting Word, Cut Any Way," 5/6/79, *New York Times*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Goldman, Eleanor Clift and John Lindsay, "Jimmy Versus Teddy," 5/14/79, *Newsweek*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁴¹ Dead man's hand, two pair (aces and eights), was supposedly the hand held by Wild Bill Hickock when he was shot dead.

ratification debate was expected to be “one of the most intense and important legislative battles of the decade,” and Senate opinions ran the gamut, from support (Ted Kennedy, Alan Cranston), to skepticism (Howard Baker) to firm plans to work for the treaty’s rejection (John Tower).¹⁴² Yet the outcome of the battle had still to be decided.

“Predicting the final outcome now,” wrote *Post* staff writer Robert Kaiser, “would be rather like predicting next October’s weather.” So much of the critical influence looked to be out of Carter’s hands. Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, predicted the paper, would be the Administration’s key persuader. Senate Majority Leader Robert Byrd, Minority Leader Baker, Armed Services Committee Chair John Stennis, Georgian Sam Nunn and verification expert John Glenn figured to play key roles in the Senate, one way or the other. This list was topped off by one wild card: “Henry Kissinger can give any Republican senator an excuse to vote for SALT, if that’s what they’re looking for,” said a Senate aide.¹⁴³

Yet Carter felt he really knew SALT, and the issue was far too important to let get out of his hands. While Vance was handling the public announcement, Carter made morning presentations to Byrd and Baker, then briefed another 20 Senators in the afternoon. Pro-treaty letters were sent to all 100 Senators, and Carter made his case for the treaty one more time for the day at an evening congressional campaign dinner.¹⁴⁴ The next day, May 10, Carter began his public pro-SALT blitz with a breakfast meeting with the American Retail Federation. He called the treaty “the most important single

¹⁴² Don Oberdorfer, “U.S., Soviets Reach SALT Agreement; U.S. and Soviets Reach Basic Agreement on SALT,” 5/10/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

¹⁴³ Robert G. Kaiser, “Next: An Uncertain Senate: Administration Carries SALT Campaign to Uncertain Senate: News Analysis,” 5/10/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

¹⁴⁴ Don Oberdorfer, “U.S., Soviets Reach SALT Agreement; U.S. and Soviets Reach Basic Agreement on SALT,” 5/10/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

achievement that could possibly take place for our nation during my lifetime...rejection of this treaty, now that it has been negotiated, would be a devastating blow to the United States of America and to the Soviet Union. It would harm our nation's security and it would be a massive, destructive blow to world peace." Carter knew some Senators would study the provisions of the treaty as intensely as he had; however, he also knew that some would be more inclined to "listen primarily to the voice of America." which Carter would try to influence with more rhetorical appeals. His strategy was to campaign heavily for the Treaty before the Summit, while it had the attention of Americans.¹⁴⁵ It was the paramount issue.

Carter would receive assistance in this effort from an unexpected source: influential liberals. *The New Republic* came out in unequivocal support of SALT II. It established rules for the arms race, and rejection would "lead to worst-case assumptions about Soviet capabilities and intentions, expensive compensatory US programs and a poisonous political environment both internationally and at home." The Soviets have not been above exploiting loopholes in previous agreements, wrote the editors, but had never "brazenly" violated their terms. In summary, "It is *because* they are up to no good that we need SALT."¹⁴⁶ The magazine echoed Carter almost perfectly on this issue.

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This support, however, showed nothing more than that liberals would not allow their disdain for a candidate to prevent them from supporting an agreeable policy – the blind squirrel effect. The weakened state of Carter's position in the Democratic Party continued to become more apparent. Just after the SALT announcement (the *New York*

¹⁴⁵ Edward Walsh. "SALT: The Tortuous Path: President: Rejection of SALT Would Be 'Devastating Blow,'" 5/11/79. *Washington Post*. from LexisNexis Academic

¹⁴⁶ "We Support SALT," *The New Republic*, May 5, 1979, pp. 5-10.

Times picked up the story on May 22), a group of 5 Democratic Congressmen launched a “Draft Kennedy” campaign designed to replace Jimmy Carter on the 1980 ticket with the Massachusetts Senator. The group aimed to create a groundswell of support that would “make it irresistible for [Kennedy] to run.”¹⁴⁷ Clearly, SALT II – which Kennedy strongly supported – was not enough to redeem Carter in the eyes of liberal Democratic critics. It was also clear that while Kennedy continued to deny any intention of running, no one took him seriously.

The draft-Kennedy movement was more widespread than five congressmen. A local group in Cleveland was trying to accomplish something similar. Cleveland Democratic County Chairman Timothy Hagan reflected a viewpoint widely felt among Liberals when he said, “We are not going to let the Carter administration redefine the purpose of the Democratic Party without a fight.” Some Democratic congressmen worried that Carter would be detrimental to their re-election chances.¹⁴⁸

While many Liberals were wide-eyed about the possibility of a Kennedy candidacy, there were still a few voices of dissent. Tom Wicker wrote in the *New York Times* that the constant specter of a Kennedy candidacy was bad for the Democrats. What little political authority Carter had left was slipping away, and this would hurt his ability to govern. It would drastically impact the chances of SALT II ratification. Wicker also wrote that Kennedy did not need to engage in his half-hearted denials, but should flatly “state...that he does not intend to run, will not accept a draft, [and] disavows all efforts on his behalf.” Kennedy simply did not need such an early start to his campaign, because

¹⁴⁷ Steven V. Roberts, “5 Congressmen Join to Dump President,” 5/22/79, *New York Times*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁴⁸ “‘Kennedy Fever’ – Why It’s Rising Again,” 5/21/79, *U.S. News and World Report*, from LexisNexis Academic.

of his name and high position, and would be able to enter the campaign later if he felt the need.¹⁴⁹ Even though there was a widespread feeling that no incumbent was entitled to renomination, challenging one was not a task to be taken lightly. Even Representative Richard Ottinger, one of the five Congressmen who started the Draft-Kennedy group, admitted this. "All of us have projects which need the support of the Administration, and there is the possibility of retribution," he said. It is telling that despite awareness of this fact, Ottinger and others felt strongly enough about Carter to move against him anyway.¹⁵⁰

Before May was out, Kennedy had opened a new front in his battle with Carter: health care. Three days before Health, Education and Welfare Secretary Joe Califano announced the Administration's program, Kennedy proposed what *Newsweek* called "a revolutionary womb-to-tomb health insurance plan." Kennedy successfully beat Carter to the punch and made "it look as if the Administration was racing its motors and padding its numbers to catch up." *Newsweek* used the incident as a lead-in for a 1700 word "maybe Ted will, maybe Ted won't" article, that wasted no time in noting in its very first sentence that Kennedy had proposed his plan "in the crystal-lit Senate Caucus Room, where his two elder brothers began their quests for the Presidency." and later referred back to that room as "That Room."¹⁵¹

Carter's patience with the Senator who hovered over his every move was wearing thin, especially in light of his half-hearted statements in support of Carter's renomination and reelection that no one took seriously. Despite Carter's repeated insistence that he

¹⁴⁹ Tom Wicker, "Dumping and Drafting," 5/25/79, *New York Times*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁵⁰ Steven V. Roberts, "5 Congressmen Join to Dump President," 5/22/79, *New York Times*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁵¹ Peter Goldman, John Lindsay, James Doyle and Eleanor Clift, "Coming on Strong," 5/28/79, *Newsweek*, from LexisNexis Academic.

took Kennedy at his word, the Senator had to appear disingenuous to Carter. He was, in the eyes of many Liberal Democrats and the media, a candidate for President in 1980 and taking every opportunity he could to point out Carter's failures.

Even more measured Democrats found it difficult to resist the Camelot magnetism. At the intellectual level, it was a widely held belief among prominent Democrats that Kennedy would choose not to run. Others believed that Kennedy would run only if it looked like Carter would lose to the Republican candidate in a landslide. Emotionally, though, the Kennedy pull was hard to resist, as proven by the prominence of Draft-Kennedy movements and the coverage given to Kennedy's every move. By the first week of June, Kennedy had opened up a 58-25 lead in the Gallup poll.¹⁵²

Carter's weak domestic political position had serious consequences for contemporary and historical assessments of his Presidency, including those focused on his foreign policy. To understand the image of Carter's foreign policy that came about, one must understand he had little in the way of political authority and was disliked by so many that he rarely got the benefit of the doubt. Even as Carter was achieving his two greatest foreign policy priorities, an Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty and a SALT II Treaty, showing that his determined personal involvement paid dividends, he remained unpopular even among Democrats. With little hope for a positive outcome in Nicaragua, Carter was running out of ways to generate momentum.

¹⁵² Gallup Poll, 6/1-4/79, Roper Center iPoll Database.

Chapter 5
“Until it was too late to ensure an ending by political means”
June – July, 1979

On June 2, Nicaragua once again exploded when the *Washington Post* brought news of the Final Sandinista Offensive to the beltway. The FSLN had used television and radio broadcasts from Costa Rica to announce the start of the offensive. The Costa Ricans had never been able to expel the Sandinistas, thanks partly to civilian sympathy for them (and dislike of Somoza) and partly due to sympathy for them in the Civil Guard, the force that Costa Rica maintained in lieu of an army. Now, violence was erupting in the northern and southern border regions of Nicaragua.¹⁵³

On June 7, the final offensive became front page news with two stories totaling about 2000 words that somehow tied into Nicaragua. One story reported on a House Merchant Marine Subcommittee hearing on the topic of possible Panamanian arms supplies to the Sandinistas. The article, however, did not portray the hearing as an attempt by Somoza backers to hold implementing legislation for the Panama Canal Treaty hostage. Rather, the hearing was portrayed as an attempt by conservatives to use the Nicaraguan situation to cripple the Canal Treaty. The hearing had not been called by Somoza backers but by two Republicans, George Hansen and Robert Bauman, who opposed the treaty regardless of Somoza’s fate.¹⁵⁴

The other front page story on June 7 reported that guerrillas controlled much of Nicaragua’s second-largest city, Leon, and were battling National Guard troops for the airport. Heavy fighting raged in Matagalpa, and in the capital, Managua, a general strike

¹⁵³ Karen DeYoung, “Nicaraguan Rebels Pin Hopes on Masses in ‘Final Offensive,’” 6/2/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

¹⁵⁴ Mary Russell, “Panama Aids Guerrillas in Nicaragua. Hill Told; Panama Accused of Running Guns to Rebels,” 6/7/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

had brought the city to a near standstill. Not resting on his laurels, Somoza had declared a stage of siege, which severely curtailed civil liberties and allowed arrest and detention without charge.¹⁵⁵

Nicaragua would remain on page A1 for the next several days. On June 8, Americans learned that Managua was threatened militarily as fighting raged in provincial cities. The Sandinistas appeared to be doing quite well, having shown an ability to control rough terrain, procure civilian support and ambush National Guard reinforcements.¹⁵⁶ The next day, the Sandinistas approached within 10 miles of Managua and took over the city of Masaya, 20 miles from the capital. The Somoza government was slowly losing credibility, as it claimed that the country was under “total government control” but journalists discovered that to be clearly not the case.¹⁵⁷

It was in this context on June 11 that all the sub-Presidential decisionmakers of the Carter Administration save Vance – replaced by Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher – converged in the Situation Room at 3:30 for a Presidential Review Committee meeting. Though the topic was Central America generally, more than half of the 100 minute meeting was devoted to Nicaragua. Deputy Director of Central Intelligence Frank Carlucci laid on the table the most critical change in the situation: it was no longer likely that Somoza would be able to maintain power until the 1981 elections. The Left was strengthening, the Center was weakening, and foreign

¹⁵⁵ Karen DeYoung, “Somoza Declares State of Siege in Nicaragua; Battles With Sandinista Guerrillas Escalating,” 6/7/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

¹⁵⁶ Karen DeYoung, “Rebels Challenge Somoza’s Control In Outlying Cities; Rebels Advance in Nicaragua,” 6/8/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

¹⁵⁷ Karen DeYoung, “Guerrillas Press Drive In Nicaragua: Fierce Fighting Continues Throughout Nicaragua; Andean Countries Announce Attempt to Confine Strife,” 6/9/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

intervention was increasing. Therefore, pointed out Christopher, the U.S. needed to revise its policy.

Though he did not chair this meeting, Brzezinski was the controlling force. He advocated a strong U.S. statement of policy, in recognition of perceived ambiguity in the American position and the need to eliminate that. The U.S. should speak in favor of self determination and in opposition to foreign intervention. Such a statement would be directed at both the allies of the Sandinistas and the allies of Nicaragua, including Israel, which had recently sent a full cargo ship of arms to the government. The possibility of an embargo (by resolution of the Organization of American States) against arms suppliers was also raised; Brzezinski noted that it had to be a cooperative effort with other Latin American nations but was a good idea. He also advocated something new: a peace force, comprised of Latin American troops, which would not remove Somoza but would keep the peace and fill the vacuum created by his departure. National Security Adviser for Latin America Robert Pastor agreed with this suggestion, and over light objections from Viron Vaky, Christopher did as well. As newly christened American Ambassador to Nicaragua Lawrence Pezzullo pointed out, such an idea was realistic, because Somoza was “much more of a pariah in the Hemisphere than is thought in the United States. The situation in the OAS [was] not really that divided. Somoza [had] alienated so many people that he [had] even given anti-communism a bad name.”

The Americans were on the ball in the sense that they recognized the need for a new strategy and devised one. But that strategy’s fatal flaw revealed itself in the assumptions underlying Brzezinski’s peace force proposal. No one expected the Latin Americans to immediately accept that proposal; the goal, rather, was to plant a seed, an

idea, in their minds so that they would be ready to accept the plan eventually. The only person at the meeting who seemed to have any inkling that the situation could not wait for “eventually” was Deputy National Security Adviser David Aaron, who said that “there was a fair chance that in three days Somoza won’t be there.” While the others (led by Christopher) agreed that they needed to move as rapidly as they could and be effective, their policy would take time. Time that, as it would turn out, they did not have.¹⁵⁸

A couple of days later, the Conclusions from the meeting crossed the President’s desk. He was able to tear himself away from his briefing books and preparations for the Vienna Summit with Brezhnev long enough to give them a great deal of attention, going over them point by point and approving all the steps except one – the embargo. “Embargo against Israel?” Carter scrawled on the sheet, seeming to suggest that this was a problematic possibility.¹⁵⁹ This would seem to indicate that, whatever troubles there may have been in Nicaragua, one or both of two things. First, in terms of geopolitics, the Middle East was more important than Latin America. Carter did not want to risk upsetting Israel and disturbing the delicate balance of his peace process. Second, in terms of domestic politics, the Middle East was more important than Latin America. Carter may have felt that such a strong action against Israel for any reason would have roused the American Jewish community into a frenzy. To make matters worse, such an embargo would have hurt Somoza, meaning that Somoza supporters would have joined the frenzy.

¹⁵⁸ “Presidential Review Committee.” June 11, 1979, Minutes, “Meetings – PRC 111 – 6/11/79” folder, Box 25, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library

¹⁵⁹ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, “PRC on US Policy to Central America,” undated, “Meetings – PRC 111 – 6/11/79” folder, Box 25, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

Such thoughts, however, were far from Carter's mind on June 15 as he strolled along the South Grounds of the White House to the helicopter that would take him to Andrews Air Force Base and Air Force One, which would fly him to Vienna. Not only would the SALT II Treaty, Carter's crown jewel, be signed, but Carter would be meeting the Soviet Premier himself for the first time. Carter had long hoped that such a summit would mark a significant change for the better in U.S.-Soviet relations, and he had prepared thoroughly for this trip. Other crises would have to wait.

There would be five plenary sessions at which the two heads of state did the talking but the entire American and Soviet delegations attended, as well as private meetings and a signing ceremony for the SALT II Treaty. At the first of these plenaries, it was Brezhnev who took the offensive. The entire premise of American policy toward the Soviet Union, as he understood it, was questionable:

"Quite frequently the concept of combining competition and cooperation between our nations was voiced in the United States. In the Soviet view, that formula rests on quicksand. It could hardly serve as a reliable reference point for policy. In the United States the U.S.S.R. was frequently referred to as an adversary. By competition or rivalry our two countries would not be able to resolve a single problem of bilateral or international relations."¹⁶⁰

Carter did not really address this statement during his remarks at this plenary. He did, however, get into a bit of a tussle with Brezhnev that showed that Carter was willing and able to stand up for himself and would suggest that Carter let these remarks pass because he felt they did not merit a response, did not require a response, or some other calculating, rather than weak, reason.

¹⁶⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, "First Plenary Meeting between President Carter and President Brezhnev," 6/16/79, "Memcons: President, 6/79" folder, Box 37, National Security affairs, Brzezinski Material – Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

Brezhnev expressed a desire to know why Carter had approved a significant increase in the defense budget. He felt that this was contrary to the spirit of SALT II. Carter responded by pointing out that “year after year for the last fifteen years the Soviet Union had steadily increased expenditures for weapons of all kinds, and that it had done so at a much greater rate than the United States.”

Brezhnev denied that the Soviet Union was spending at a faster rate, and Carter reiterated that it was. Brezhnev finally ended the tussle with a whimper: “In any event, we should not hide the truth from each other.” This cleared the way for Carter to proceed to other matters. It was clear that if nothing else, the discussions were going to be candid and frank.

That evening, the two delegations met again for the second plenary meeting, this one on the subject of the soon-to-be-signed SALT II Treaty. It was, in significant part, for show – the two sides made several statements by prior agreement, with Brezhnev affirming that the Soviets would not deploy any aircraft with more than 20 cruise missiles and Carter affirming that the United States had no Minuteman III missiles in Minuteman II launchers. The session did, however, contain some interesting asides.

The first of these featured Brezhnev taking it upon himself to give the U.S. side advice on how to pursue ratification of the treaty.

“[The opponents of the treaty] were very vulnerable in one respect. These opponents, in speaking out against the Treaty, were thereby exposing themselves as being against an improvement in Soviet-U.S. relations and against disarmament and in favor of the arms race and, in the final analysis, they were proponents of war... It seemed to Brezhnev that if the leaders of our two countries were to make parallel statements along these lines, the opponents of the treaty would be unable to achieve their goal.”

Again, Carter let this provocative line of remarks pass without comment. Yet when Brezhnev claimed that deployment of the MX was contrary to the objectives of

SALT II, Carter responded that the MX paled in comparison to the Soviet SS-18, and that the MX did not constitute an escalation.¹⁶¹

But Carter was concerned with more important things. On June 17, following a third plenary session on other arms control issues, a fourth plenary session on international issues was held. Carter spoke first at this meeting, and stated some of the American concerns. He pointed out that the U.S. had vital interests in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, and spoke frankly about Cuba. He also expressed concern about the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. When Brezhnev's turn to speak arrived, he issued denial after denial:

“[Brezhnev] had already had occasion to note that mutual understanding and, to an even greater degree, cooperation between our two states, including cooperation in international affairs, was greatly hampered when one of the sides was attributing changes in the world, movements for national liberation and independence, as well as for social progress, to the malevolent will of one of the sides...Brezhnev wanted to say that this entire theory [that the USSR was trying to surround the Middle East to the detriment of the United States] was an absolute fairy tale.”

Brezhnev also addressed Cuba.

“Here and there it was asserted that the Soviet Union was using Cubans to interfere in other areas. Nothing could be further from the truth. Cuba was an independent country and as an independent country Cuba rendered assistance at the request of legitimate governments which were threatened by aggression. This was fully in accord with international law and the UN Charter.”¹⁶²

Though Brezhnev was talking about Africa, Cuba was also tied to the Sandinistas, and one wonders how the Sandinistas could fit the description of “legitimate governments which were threatened by aggression.” There was no opportunity for rebuttal at this session, however. Carter made his presentation, Brezhnev made his, and then the sides

¹⁶¹ Memorandum of Conversation, 6/16/79, SALT II, “Memcons – President, 6/79” folder, Box 37, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material – Subject File, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹⁶² Memorandum of Conversation, Fourth Plenary Meeting: International Issues, 6/17/79, “Memcons – President, 6/79” folder, Box 37, National Security Affairs, Brzezinski Material – Subject File.

adjourned. Little in the way of new information had been exchanged. Carter saw this as an early clue that the summit was not going to have the transformative effect on U.S.-Soviet relations that he had hoped:

“My concerns had not been alleviated by his words, because the fact was that when violence occurred in almost any place on earth, the Soviets or their proxies were most likely to be at the center of it. This kind of interventionism could precipitate a serious confrontation in the future if our own national interests should become involved.”¹⁶³

After a final plenary session on June 18 and the ceremonial signing of the SALT II Treaty, Carter got back on Air Force One and returned to Washington just in time to give a nationally televised address to the nation that night. The prize attained, SALT II would be the topic. Unlike all of his previous ratification speeches which had scarcely mentioned the treaty, this would place the treaty before the nation. However, Carter got the speech off to a less-than-optimistic start when he opened with the declaration that “the truth of the nuclear age is that the United States and the Soviet Union must live in peace, or we may not live at all.”¹⁶⁴

For those not frightened or disgusted into turning off their televisions, Carter’s speech contained a few major themes. He presented SALT II as part of a process, something larger than the Carter Administration, by emphasizing those who had gone before. You may not like me, Carter seemed to be saying, or everything I have done, but this treaty is not about me. Stability and security had been “the purpose of American policy ever since the rivalry” started, and “every President” has tried to reduce the arms race – and he named them specifically: Eisenhower and nuclear testing. Johnson with atomic weapons negotiations, Ford at Vladivostok. “SALT II is very important,” noted

¹⁶³ Carter, 256

¹⁶⁴ “Vienna Summit Meeting Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress,” 6/18/79, American Presidency Project.

Carter. “but it’s more than a single arms control agreement: it’s part of a long, historical process of gradually reducing the danger of nuclear war – a process that we in this room must not undermine.”

The speech also contained its share of bones for the hawkish elements of the nation. Surely Brezhnev would groan when he saw the text of the speech, which included elements such as this:

“Of course, SALT II will not end the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. That competition is based on fundamentally different visions of human society and human destiny. As long as that basic difference persists, there will always be some degree of tension in the relationship between our two countries. The United States has no fear of this rivalry. But we want it to be peaceful.”

Carter also emphasized that the United States must be “so strong that no potential adversary would dare be tempted to attack our country.”

The third major theme of the address was an enumeration of how the SALT II Treaty was good for the self-interest of the United States. It ended an imbalance in strategic weapons that had been in favor of the Soviets. It would preserve all U.S. weapons programs while reducing those of the Soviets. It would save the United States money that they would have had to spend on arms buildup. “In short,” Carter said. “SALT II is not a favor we are doing for the Soviet Union. It’s a deliberate, calculated move that we are making as a matter of self-interest for the United States – a move that happens to serve the goals of both security and survival, that strengthens both the military position of our own country and the cause of world peace.” Carter then closed with some general words about the broader relationship and state of the world – one of peace.

Carter had delivered a well-balanced speech. Its only real misstep was attempting to scare the Senate into ratification in its first line. In addition to this, though, Carter laid

out a positive case for the Treaty and tried to distance himself from it – for both the benefit of the treaty and himself. Carter had known for awhile that the ratification fight would likely be a referendum on the Administration’s Soviet policy and he knew there were some vocal elements that opposed that policy. Therefore, he tried to separate the two. Carter also knew, however, that the reverse was true. The ratification fight would be bruising for him, politically. Thus he was also trying to lessen that damage.

In the end, the speech was of minor importance. It was actually one of Carter’s better speeches – Senators such as Democrat Sam Nunn and Republican Pete Domenici praised the speech, and one expert put the vote count for SALT ratification after the speech at just 5 short of the 67 required votes to ratify the treaty.¹⁶⁵ Many Senators, however, skipped the speech and only a third of the nation saw it.¹⁶⁶ These appear to be symptoms of the weakened state of Carter’s relevance, which would hit him like a ton of bricks two weeks later.

Moreover, the Vienna Summit and the signing of SALT II failed to help Carter make up any ground against Ted Kennedy. Ken Bode reassured liberal readers of *The New Republic* that “if Kennedy were going to run, he would be doing just about what he actually is doing – staking out his differences clearly, keeping his electoral options open, but stopping short of announcing so as not to exacerbate the governmental stalemate.” Such a statement must have surely caused some bleeding hearts to flutter; as Bode wrote, “Not in recent memory has a president of either party been as far out of step with the major constituency groups of the party whose label he bears as Carter is today.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Robert G. Kaiser, “A Skeptical Senate Responds Cautiously to SALT II Appeal.” 6/19/79, *Washington Post*, from ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁶⁶ Gallup Poll, 6/22/79-6/25/79, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

¹⁶⁷ Ken Bode, “What’s Teddy Up To?” *The New Republic*, June 16, 1979, pp. 7-9.

Such a statement at the time of one of his greatest triumphs also made a frustrated Carter's tolerance for the Senator's omnipresence reach a breaking point. Carter and his inner circle could be "mean sons of bitches (or just bitches) when they [had] to be." and shortly before his departure for Vienna, at a White House buffet for 80 Congressmen, Carter demonstrated this.¹⁶⁸ He declared that "If Kennedy runs in '80. I'll whip his ass." When he was asked to repeat the remark, Representative Toby Moffett suggested that he not do so. "No, I'll repeat it," was Carter's answer. "If Kennedy runs in '80. I'll whip his ass."¹⁶⁹

Kennedy's response was good-natured, saying that "I always felt the White House would stand behind me, but I didn't realize how close they intended to be." Kennedy was not rattled, but he had no reason to be. Carter was the man under pressure. Kennedy was the man with a 62-27 lead in the post-Vienna Gallup poll.¹⁷⁰ One Democratic Senator called Carter's remark "the perfect empty threat." Tom Wicker suggested that Kennedy, not Carter, was now the leader of the Democratic Party.¹⁷¹ But rather than reach out to mend the fences of the party, as Wicker suggested that Carter do, he acrimoniously challenged Kennedy. It is easy to understand why. Carter, perhaps, was finally sick of not having a party to call his own.

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On June 19, Zbigniew Brzezinski brought together the Special Coordinating Committee (SCC) once again to discuss Nicaragua. He highlighted the importance of the

¹⁶⁸ John Osborne. "Toughening Up," *The New Republic*, June 23, 1979, p. 10

¹⁶⁹ "I'll Whip His Ass," 6/25/79, *Newsweek*, from LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁷⁰ Gallup Poll, 6/22/79-6/25-79, from Roper Center iPoll Database.

¹⁷¹ Tom Wicker, "Carter and Kennedy," 6/17/79, *New York Times*, ProQuest Historical Newspapers

issue, saying that "There is no interest in creating a crisis-like atmosphere after the summit, but events in Nicaragua would impact on [sic] U.S.-Soviet relations and on the President's domestic political standing, particularly in the South and the West."¹⁷² The most significant new piece of information under consideration was the revised CIA estimate that Somoza could be ousted within a week. Time was of the essence. Yet the decisionmakers knew the outlook was grim, as Brzezinski made very clear to Carter:

"Finally, the SCC suggested I share with you our fear that you may soon face a very difficult decision between two very unattractive alternatives: either a Castroist Sandinista victory, which will have very serious implications for the Panama implementing legislation and SALT and also have serious political ramifications, or US military intervention to prevent a Sandinista victory and try to permit a moderate political outcome. US intervention would unquestionably destroy the credibility of the policies you have developed to Latin America and the Third World and provoke virtually universal condemnation."¹⁷³

Carter and his advisers recognized that they may well have already failed. Yet they would see the situation through to the end.

The situation, however, took a turn for the gruesome on June 20. ABC correspondent Bill Stewart, in full view of the cameras, was ordered to his knees by a National Guardsman and summarily executed with a single shot to his head. Curiously, the first death of a foreign correspondent in Nicaragua merited only a secondary headline in the next day's *New York Times*, rather than a primary one. Yet according to Robert Pastor, "the response was unlike anything I had seen since I had been in the White House. The phone rang incessantly and telegrams...poured in by the thousands." He offered some sample telegrams, one of which read,

¹⁷² Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: the United States and Nicaragua*, rev. and updated (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2002), 115

¹⁷³ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, "SCC Meeting on Nicaragua," 6/20/79, "Meetings: SCC 170: 6/23/79" folder, Box 30, Donated Historical Material, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

“We feel it is about time the Presidency takes a firm stand against countries which commit such atrocities towards American citizens. Why is the United States being so docile? It’s no wonder we suffer from a loss of national pride.”¹⁷⁴

The next day, Brzezinski made a case for intervention that invoked domestic politics. A communist takeover in Nicaragua would cause the United States to “be considered as being incapable of dealing with problems in our own backyard and impotent in the face of Cuban intervention. This will have devastating domestic implications, including SALT.” There is no record of Carter’s response to the domestic issues specifically, though he did make clear that “he had no intention of intervening unilaterally.”¹⁷⁵ Since we know how important SALT was to Carter, it is interesting that Carter was unpersuaded by Brzezinski’s argument. There are a few possible reasons for this. He may have believed the current plan could prevent the problems Brzezinski feared. He may have believed that he would be able to explain to the American people that such a takeover was not the fault of the United States. He may have believed intervention would hurt SALT with the Left more than it would help with the Right. Carter, in any case, was very decisive in rejecting Brzezinski’s suggestion. There was no waffling here.

The Nicaragua SCC reconvened on June 23 to decide how to respond to the recent meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS). Fourteen countries had supported a resolution that would prohibit any OAS involvement in Nicaragua. Panama had recognized the provisional government set up by the Sandinistas. The decision was made to have Warren Christopher negotiate at the OAS to make the resolution acceptable to the U.S. The Administration would also prepare communications for Somoza, Carazo, and

¹⁷⁴ Pastor, 117

¹⁷⁵ Pastor, 120.

Torrijos. The United States was prepared to offer support to the National Guard if Somoza stepped down. Here was the only clarification Carter made to the group's conclusions, noting that "before we provide support to the National Guard, the transitional governing group who controls the Guard must be determined *by me* [emphasis added] to be legitimized by adequate support from OAS members or by Nicaraguan people."¹⁷⁶

Christopher managed to bargain some wiggle room into the OAS resolution.¹⁷⁷ It passed 17-2 and, in addition to calling for immediate replacement of Somoza with a broadly-based moderate interim government, left the door open for OAS countries to "take steps to facilitate an enduring and peaceful solution of the Nicaraguan problem."¹⁷⁸

Not that Somoza intended to listen. "It doesn't matter to me what some countries say who don't know the reality of Nicaragua," proclaimed a defiant Somoza. He said that the resolution was "a clear intent to violate the sovereignty of the Nicaraguan people." He put the punctuation mark on his declaration by inaugurating a new phase of the civil war: the first bombing of urban areas by the National Guard, targeted at a two square mile part of eastern Managua which the Sandinistas held.¹⁷⁹

Swirling in this context, the SCC reconvened on June 25 to set a strategy. The SCC quickly recognized that it had very little to work with: there had been no real coalescing of any moderate position. The Cubans were definitely supplying equipment to the Sandinistas and may have even had personnel in northern Costa Rica. The current

¹⁷⁶ Zbigniew Brzezinski to Jimmy Carter, "SCC Meeting on Nicaragua," 6/23/79, "Meetings – SCC 170: 6/23/79" folder, Box 30, Donated Historical Material, Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

¹⁷⁷ Pastor, 122.

¹⁷⁸ John M. Goshko. "OAS Votes for Ouster Of Somoza; OAS Calls for "Replacement" Of Somoza; Resolution Drops U.S. Proposal for Peacekeeping Role," 6/24/79, *Washington Post*, LexisNexis Academic.

¹⁷⁹ Karen DeYoung and Stephen Kinzer. "Conflict in Nicaragua; Somoza Urges Continued Struggle; Somoza Calls for Continued Fighting,," 6/25/79. *Washington Post*, LexisNexis Academic

CIA take on Somoza, as presented by CIA Director Stansfield Turner, was that he had at least a week, perhaps only a week but perhaps a few weeks more. Given this, for the first time, complete disengagement was put on the table, by Brzezinski. In light of his comments just a few days before, it is somewhat puzzling. If the U.S. was not going to intervene, he perhaps felt, then the President's political position would be better by saying "Not my problem" than by trying to influence the outcome in a less forceful manner. However, Defense Secretary Harold Brown countered by arguing that the administration had little to lose by trying to salvage a favorable outcome. "Whatever we say, it will still look as if it is a political defeat for us," he noted. After agreement from Christopher, the meeting proceeded to set the strategy. No one really disagreed with any of it: the meeting proceeded smoothly with the strategy being fleshed out.

The U.S. would attempt to divorce Somoza from the National Guard by forming an Executive Committee of a cross-section of moderate elements and would take power when Somoza left the country. At that time, a new commander would be put in charge of the National Guard. Everyone recognized that this strategy was a long shot – most clearly, David Jones, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, who explicitly noted that the National Guard was likely to disintegrate with Somoza's departure. Nevertheless, the SCC decided that it had to make an attempt. By the end of the meeting, it had amazingly convinced itself that the plan had a 50-50 chance of success, with one exception. Harold Brown suggested that the SCC "make clear to the President that we didn't think [the strategy] would be likely to work" and emphasized the importance of opening up communication with the Sandinistas.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ "Minutes," undated, "Meetings – SCC 171: 6/25/79" folder, Box 30, Donated Historical Material – Zbigniew Brzezinski Collection, Jimmy Carter Library.

The prospects for the Executive Committee plan suffered a blow on June 27. On that day, the Broad Opposition Front (FAO) – the group of moderates who had participated in the mediation effort – publicly threw its support to the Sandinista Junta. Since the Executive Committee required moderates to work, and the most visible group of moderates were no longer viable candidates, this was a blow.¹⁸¹

The FAO decision, however, persuaded some in the State Department (Pastor, perhaps unfairly and definitely unclearly, refers to “State” as holding these positions, which obscures the role of individual people) that the Executive Committee was no longer viable and that the Americans should avoid any action that could antagonize the Sandinista Junta so that the U.S. would be more able to work with the Junta once it took power. Pastor and Aaron still felt the Executive Committee was the only way to prevent a total Sandinista victory: moderating the Junta would not work because the Sandinistas would control the military. The struggle between the two prongs of the Administration’s strategy came to a head in Tokyo, where Carter, Vance and Brzezinski were participating in an economic summit when the two staffs cabled their positions to their bosses.¹⁸²

Carter was once again preoccupied; the Summit was acrimonious at times. He admitted that “this was not a time when I wanted to forget about economic summit matters and spend a lot of time on Central America.” As a result, he decided to postpone decision until after meeting with Omar Torrijos.¹⁸³ Though Torrijos was no Sadat, he and Carter had forged a good working relationship when negotiating the Panama Canal Treaty. Carter’s preoccupation with other matters once again prevented his strong involvement in Nicaragua.

¹⁸¹ Pastor, 126.

¹⁸² Pastor, 126-127

¹⁸³ Pastor, 127

On Monday, July 2, the SCC met again to hash out the strategy further. Somoza had agreed to resign if the Guard and his Party were preserved. The divisions that had gone unsettled a few days before resurfaced, with Warren Christopher and Viron Vaky advocating a complete focus on influencing the Junta, including dissociation from the National Guard; Brzezinski, Aaron and Brown doubted the American ability to influence the Sandinistas. The result of the meeting was an agreement on a four-part plan. Robert Pastor has suggested that Christopher and Vaky knew the plan was unworkable and that this fact would free Carter to implement his own ideas, which everyone felt were closer to State's than Brzezinski's. The plan called for replacing the junta with a different one that included many moderates and a newly-chosen Guard Commander.¹⁸⁴

In a meeting that afternoon, Carter immediately saw that the SCC had not taken charge of the situation, and proceeded to do so himself. "How can you expect to negotiate with the Sandinistas a total revision of the Junta that virtually excluded them," he wondered. Brzezinski was not very helpful to Carter on this day. The President wanted to retain the National Guard, but would only support it if foreign leaders were willing to do so as well. He liked the idea of expanding the Junta rather than creating an opposition body (like the Executive Committee), but he would try to make it appear as though his plan had been devised by another leader, such as Torrijos or Costa Rican President Carazo. Carter chose to take a "hidden hand" approach, rather than an attempt to overtly influence the Junta, as advocated by State department officials.¹⁸⁵

The next day, Carter presented the plan to Omar Torrijos in the Oval Office. The response of the Panamanian was animated, enthusiastic and excited, but focused on

¹⁸⁴ Pastor, 130-131.

¹⁸⁵ Pastor, 131-132

Somoza rather than anything beyond him. Pastor wrote that “It was clear that Torrijos wanted the Carter plan to succeed: what was less clear was whether he would remember the plan by the time he returned to Panama.”¹⁸⁶

This marked, for the most part, the end of Carter’s involvement in Somoza-era Nicaragua. Two weeks later, Somoza would be gone; many of the events in the interim were shaped by the U.S. Embassy in Managua, which resembled a dysfunctional family, and its communication with Deputy-level administrators (like Christopher) in Washington.

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Later that day (July 3), Carter went to Camp David to put the finishing touches on a speech to the nation he was planning on the subject of the energy problem. It was to be his fifth speech on energy. It was here that the President had an epiphany: he could not give the speech. People were not listening to him. In an impromptu fashion, he decided to remain at Camp David for several days and try to understand why. Though he had been clued in that the public had become deaf to him by a poll and a memo from Pat Caddell, who had become famous as the pollster who helped George McGovern get the Democratic nomination in 1972, the decision to stay at Camp David was his own. Many of his advisers were unhappy with the decision, most notably Vice President Mondale, who feared political disaster. Only Caddell supported the decision. Yet Carter felt that he had to find out what was wrong.

Over the next several days, small groups of people paraded through Maryland. They included governors, activists, legislators, ministers, lawyers, policy people and more. Carter spent the week listening and taking careful notes. He wanted his guests to be

¹⁸⁶ Pastor, 133-135

frank, and frank they were, about the government – “People are saying, ‘I love my country: it’s the government I hate!’” – and him personally – “When we enter the moral equivalent of war, don’t issue us BB guns.”¹⁸⁷

It is perhaps fitting that Carter once again found something else to distract him from Nicaragua at this time. It would allow that crisis to end as it began, for it was now becoming widely known that Nicaragua had entered a period of denouement. The National Guard had begun to concede the impossibility of regaining lost territory. It was down to just one Sherman tank (from an original four) while the Sandinistas had acquired several planes.¹⁸⁸ In fact, a July 5 *Post* editorial entitled, “Nicaraguan End Game,” read like the outcome was decided. It was not very harsh on the Carter Administration; in fact, it recommended that it try to co-opt the Sandinista government, which it would attempt to do. The main criticism leveled at the Administration was that “In policy, as distinguished from sometime rhetoric, the hemisphere did not identify Somoza’s continuation in power as the essence of the problem until it was too late to ensure an ending by political means.”¹⁸⁹ This was not really fair – the entire mediation effort had been designed to remove Somoza from power. Somoza blocked that effort. What *was* fair was the implication that the Administration had waited too long to take decisive action. Yet as we have seen, the Nicaraguan situation simply did not command the attention of Jimmy Carter until it was too late.

Carter later discussed one of his Camp David meetings in detail. The attendees were Charles Kirbo, former foreign policy officials Clark Clifford and Sol Linowitz,

¹⁸⁷ Carter, 114-117

¹⁸⁸ Karen DeYoung, “Somoza’s Guard Looks Increasingly Vulnerable,” 7/5/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic

¹⁸⁹ “Nicaraguan End Game,” 7/5/79, *Washington Post*, from LexisNexis Academic.

AFL-CIO leader Lane Kirkland, Common Cause President John Gardner, professional political organizer Bob Keefe, Wellesley College President Barbara Newell, and Jesse Jackson. The group talked for hours and like the other groups, part of the conversation centered on Carter personally and his skills as a leader:

“Their criticisms of me were the most severe, questioning my ability to deal with the existing problems of the nation without bringing about some change in public perceptions. They told me that I seemed bogged down in the details of administration, and that the public was disillusioned in having to face intractable problems like energy shortages and growing inflation after their expectations had been so elevated at the time of my election. On the one hand, I was involved in too many things simultaneously, but, in some cases, I had delegated too much authority to my Cabinet members. The consensus was that the public acknowledged my intelligence and integrity, my ability to articulate problems and to devise good solutions to them, but doubted my capacity to follow through with a strong enough thrust to succeed.”¹⁹⁰

Though Carter notes that much of this had resulted from his handling of the energy problem, it is no less central to our study for that fact. It bore directly on Carter’s overall political standing and the way many Americans viewed him.

Many of the criticisms Carter heard mimicked the original Caddell memo. The President had become “like the guy crying wolf” on energy.¹⁹¹ Once Carter cancelled his speech, he realized that he now had the opportunity to say something entirely different. He needed to spell out the problems that the country was facing.

On July 15, Carter came down from the mountain. At 10:00, before a national audience, Carter addressed the nation from the Oval Office, setting forth his view on America’s crisis of confidence.

¹⁹⁰ Carter, 117

¹⁹¹ Jimmy Carter Interview, Miller Center, University of Virginia, Jimmy Carter Oral History Project, 11/29/82, 62.

Conclusion

This may seem to be an abrupt ending to Carter's story, not having listened to what he had to say in perhaps his most famous speech. But his words in that speech are beside the point. The point is that he had to give it at all. Despite two great successes in foreign policy in the first half of 1979 alone, one *immediately* prior to his retreat to Camp David, Carter's political position was so weak that he felt that he needed to scrap an entire speech, retreat to Camp David for two weeks to engage in a re-examination of his Presidency to that point, and write an entirely new speech.

Carter's willingness to make such a decision – in itself a huge political gamble – is one more piece in a long line of evidence that the popular image of Carter as weak and indecisive must be judged to be wrong. His foreign policy vision, his prioritization of SALT II and Middle East peace, and his personal involvement to bring about the achievement of these priorities, show this. He consciously chose political strategies aimed towards the achievement of these priorities. He did not waver from these priorities. He also did not waver from his basic Soviet policy. The only change came when he found that the Soviets would not match his goodwill.

Yet even though this image is wrong, it can still be explained by the political situation Carter faced. On foreign policy, the entire country was split into several groups, and any policy required cobbling together the support of groups who in some ways were mutually exclusive. Also, a wide philosophical gulf separated Carter from the Democratic base, leaving him without a party. Fiscal conservatism combined with defense spending forced cuts in social spending, drawing ire from domestic liberals. The Southerner found himself alone in the center. Few viewed him favorably.

Could Carter have done any better? Erwin Hargrove says no. Given the wide gulf in the political spectrum, one possible way Carter could have handled the situation differently would have been to ignore one end or the other – most likely the Left, since Carter’s own policy increasingly shifted rightward. His defense policy and rhetoric became more hawkish. His economic policies leaned conservative. This might have defused charges of vacillation and made Carter appear more in command.

Would this strategy have worked? A moment’s thought should suggest that the strategy I have described tells Carter to essentially shun his own party. In late 1978 and most of 1979, Carter’s renomination appeared far from assured. Despite the fact that Carter did not really have a party, a President *actively breaking* from it would still have been a drastic step, especially with a strong potential challenger waiting in the wings. Yet if there was any President who had it in him to commit political suicide to produce better policy for the country, it was Jimmy Carter. He chose not to do this, even though increased support among moderates and conservatives could conceivably have made it easier for Carter to get some of his initiatives passed before his exit in 1981. This would have been a long shot, however, especially since even in early 1979, the Republicans already smelled blood in the water and an opportunity to retake the White House, causing an increase in partisanship.

Therefore, it would be *unfair* to expect Carter to deal with the political fragmentation any way other than he did. Yes, it is *possible* a daring maneuver could have seized command of the country. We will never know. The chances of that were very small, however. No politician is going to risk his political life on being dealt a royal flush. Even for someone as apolitical as Jimmy Carter, the thought process would have

gone something like this: if I have the Presidency for four more years, I can do a lot more good for the country than the other candidate would do if he had the White House. Carter, therefore, was justified in trying to bridge the political gulf.

Jimmy Carter's presidency changed dramatically in late 1979. The twin shocks of the seizing of the hostages in Iran in November and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late December radically altered the last year of his Presidency. The Hostage Crisis would cast a cloud over everything else that happened in 1980, as nightly updates kept it seared into the public mind. It would also keep Carter from pointing to his achievements in Middle East peace in 1980, since they had not resulted in sufficient stability in the region to prevent such a calamity as the Hostage crisis. The failed rescue mission made Carter look even more incompetent. The renewal of the Cold War, meanwhile, killed the SALT II treaty and set the stage for Ronald Reagan to build a significant part of his campaign around the need for American strength abroad.

Ironically, though, these shocks were not all negative. In the fall, Ted Kennedy formally announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination. In one of the all-time great cases of unfortunate political timing, his announcement coincided with the taking of the hostages. Attention immediately shifted to Iran: Americans rallied around their President in this time of great crisis. This was a huge blow to Kennedy's chances: it is why I think it is wrong to say that the Hostage Crisis cost Carter the 1980 election. Had there been no Hostage Crisis, Carter may well have been denied renomination.

The Rescue Mission, too, was a double-edged sword. Had it succeeded, Carter may well have been re-elected. It would have demonstrated ability to take charge and resolve a great crisis, and would have occurred in an election year. It would have had

such a real impact that it would have been immune to charges of an election year surprise. It could well have provided the sustainable perception of foreign policy competence that Carter needed, but it was not to be.

So what, then, is Carter's legacy? In assessing the greatness of a President, it is not indefensible to consider the President's accomplishments and troubles in an absolute sense, cutting no slack for a bad situation. There is a way in which it requires luck to be a great President. Carter was unable to generate significant support for his policies and that his misreading of the Soviets was followed by a dramatic increase in Cold War tensions. This does not prove a causal link; perhaps a less naïve Soviet policy would have generated strong domestic opposition and been impossible to implement had Carter's method not been tried and failed first. Perhaps, however, such a policy would have re-escalated the Cold War, generated strong domestic backing for the President, paved the way for his re-election and hastened the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, a Wilsonian who undoubtedly would have worked much better with Carter than Leonid Brezhnev. It is hard not to take one look at Carter's presidency and call it a failure, even after pulling away the incorrect image – until we look at what we have pulled away.

The greatness of a President cannot be judged without placing him in his domestic political context. Carter presided over America in a time of great change, and the jaded eye that cast him in such a negative light was created by many elements not of his own making – dislike of Southerners and the fractured state of foreign policy opinion. Although the philosophical gulf separating Carter from liberal Democrats was Carter's fault in that he could have changed his position and joined them, 25 years of American

history, including the rise of the New Democrats and the Presidency of Bill Clinton, have vindicated Carter on this point.

It was exceptionally difficult, therefore, for Carter to generate any kind of support, and this was not his fault. This means that the conscientious historian cannot judge Carter to be a failed president. Carter could be expected to do nothing but make the best of the world in which he found himself. Indeed, it is cases like Carter that make armchair discussions of great presidents or presidential rankings seem nonsensical. Carter cannot be fairly compared with Dwight Eisenhower or John F. Kennedy, who were dealt situational full houses to Carter's aces and eights. Carter was not a "great" president because he lacks the accomplishments typically associated with "great" presidents. These *typically* include either managing a war or successfully pushing through a large-scale domestic program with a catchy title. Carter had neither of these. But this was not his fault – he was not a failure. Rather, he was a President with the tools of a strong leader in an unenviable situation, presiding over America in transition, who did as well as could be reasonably expected. Such a judgment transcends any great-failure continuum.

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