

PRESIDENCY RESEARCH



Editor: Michael Nelson
Assistant Editor: Stephen L. Robertson

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CONTENTS

News and Notes	2
A Tale of Two Presidents: Carter, Reagan, and Lessons for Public Morality Bert A. Rockman	3
Learning From Presidential Transfers James P. Pfiffner	15
Presidential Success Is Not So Great Mark P. Petracca	21
The Election of Presidents and Prime Ministers Drinks Party Remarks and Functional Equivalents Lawrence D. Longley	27
Recent Publications on the Presidency	32

NEWS AND NOTES

NEUSTADT AWARD

The Richard E. Neustadt Award will be given by the Presidency Research Section for the best book published in 1985 in the field of the American presidency. Nominations must be submitted to the Neustadt Award Committee by February 1, 1986. Publishers should send a copy of each nominated book to each member of the committee. Committee members are:

Professor George Grassmuck, chair
Department of Political Science
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48104

Professor Valerie Bunce
Department of Political Science
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL 60201

Professor Mark Petracca
School of Social Sciences
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92717

The winner of the Neustadt Award for 1984 was The Leadership Question: The Presidency and the Political System, by Bert A. Rockman (Praeger Publishers).

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A TALE OF TWO PRESIDENTS: CARTER, REAGAN, AND LESSONS FOR PUBLIC MORALITY

Bert A. Rockman
University of Pittsburgh

Historical circumstance has provided analysts of the presidency with an almost perfect natural experiment. Adjacent to one another in historical time are two presidents, Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, of vastly different temperaments and styles of leadership and, above all, vastly different levels of perceived political success. In opinion polls, and even more convincingly in electoral outcome, Carter met with an unusually low level of approval, whereas Reagan has sustained an impressive average level of approval among presidents of the past two decades.

That these two presidents and their respective presidencies thus far have been accorded such different fates is important because the causes of their different levels of success are thought, correctly or not, to lie in the sharply different ways in which they have conducted their presidencies. The possibility that this is an incorrect inference from a scientific perspective --- that the sources of political success are not mainly in presidential leadership style --- is not the relevant point. The main point is that in the American political system where so little behavior is organizationally structured, politicians are on the lookout to see what works and what doesn't in order to evade misfortune. They tend to look for simple do's and don'ts premised on the logic of matched dependent behavior. Since politicians cannot individually affect the great tides of political change or be fully certain about the fluctuations and vicissitudes of events around them, they try to learn from what is manipulable -- that is, how leaders perform as leaders. Such lessons are often primitive and simplistic in causal structure; that is their compelling attraction. The crude correlation is an equivalent of the one page memo. It carries force by the sheer power of its simplicity. Hence, my basic assumption

is that politicians draw stark lessons as to which behaviors and styles are rewarded and punished, and since these lessons can influence their behavior, they also carry profound implications for public morality.

To some degree, styles of leadership are connected to presidential goals and the goals, themselves, are by no means easy to infer. In the first place, goals and objectives can change during the course of an administration in response to changed conditions and their interaction with political considerations. Secondly, goals are often discovered in process rather than imposed deductively. I suspect that apparent inconsistency of goals or their relative pliability (popularly perceived as indecisiveness or vacillation) also is related to the complexity of goal structure. In other words, the starker the picture, the less likely it will be altered in its fundamentals, whereas the more complex the goal structure, the less constant it will appear to be since facts and events are likely to influence goal priorities. Jimmy Carter, an example of the latter condition, was perceived by his former speechwriter, James Fallows, to believe in fifty things, but no one thing. No one, it is clear, has perceived Reagan that way. Goals and styles, consequently, are not wholly independent of one another. By implication, then, the "lessons" to be drawn from the Carter and Reagan presidencies are also about goals -- the need to keep them constant, simple, and simply expressed.

The key "lessons," as I understand them, are briefly outlined below. I doubt that all of these lessons will be perceived as self-evident, or necessarily viewed in the light that I present them. Like presidents, scholars of the presidency have only the power to persuade, so if we are to indeed draw lessons from a look at the Carter and Reagan presidencies as exemplars of political failure and success, the caveats must now end and the persuasion begin.

LESSON #1: BE UPBEAT AND STEADFAST

One of the main features of Ronald Reagan's personality is his simple optimism, perhaps bred from the period and environment in which he was raised or the film roles he played. Whatever the cause, the symptom is evident. Another central aspect of the Reagan public personality is his commitment to certain views about the world that do not yield to much ambiguity. Anecdotes not analytics are his forte. As Leslie Gelb recently has argued in a New York Times Magazine article, Reagan's ability to cut through (or ignore) complication allows him to communicate on the public's wavelength. Perhaps no president since Franklin D. Roosevelt has been able to do that so successfully.

Both FDR and Reagan, whatever their differences, provided the public with the impression that they were leading the country with confidence and in desirable directions away from the problems that seem to have sapped confidence under their predecessors. Each provided a vision of clear optimism and broad purpose in contrast to the engineer presidents, Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter, who preceded them.

Public confidence is not a matter of presidential self-confidence. Hoover's own past record of achievement obviously provided him with much personal confidence, but that was difficult to impart in the throes of a deep economic crisis to which no one (including Roosevelt) had any obvious answers. As for Carter, whatever his previous accomplishments, he too was not lacking in personal confidence. It is difficult to imagine how one could entitle a political biography Why Not the Best? without having a large dose of confidence (even arrogance) in his abilities. Indeed, Erwin Hargrove's forthcoming book on Carter emphasizes the overwhelming nature of his sense of self-confidence as a cause of many of his problems -- rubbing politicians the wrong way, the lack of adequate White House organization and delegation, and, to some extent, intellectual arrogance.

Unlike Carter, Reagan has focused confidence on his vision and on the society, not on his personal attributes. The pursuit of his vision has been bold and fairly constant. Facts in an analytical sense have not disturbed that vision. Precisely the opposite applied to Carter. His consumption of "facts" and analysis was legendary and that led him into seeming indecisiveness -- the critique that he lacked an overall thrust. Often, Carter's ill-fated message seemed to be that life was complex and policy benefits were long run. Such a message, as they would say in another ill-fated administration, does not play in Peoria.

LESSON #2: INTUITIONS PLAY BETTER THAN ANALYTICS, FOR THE FUTURE IS NOW

A correlative proposal to the first one is that presidents (who, in any event, need little further impetus to do so) will be guided more by their instincts than by analysis. Following from this, policy is designed for the short run because the long run is both unforeseeable and the benefits accruing therein, especially if they require short-run costs, are not presently comprehensible.

Carter's interest in analysis and knowledge as the building blocks of policy stemmed not only from his training as an engineer, but also from what Hargrove calls his "collective goods" conception of the presidency. At the core of Carter's conception of his role was the notion that the president could help to forestall future crises by educating the public to present complexities. Prominent among such efforts was the early energy proposal to induce the nation toward both energy conservation and enhanced energy supply. Similarly prominent was the effort to move the premises of U.S. foreign policy from a dominant focus on East-West antagonisms to regional issues and problems of North-South relations. The problem of a "collective goods" presidency, however, is that it is especially vulnerable to the absence of a perceived crisis.

