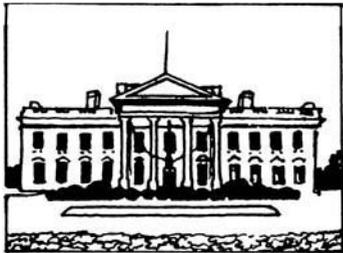


States of the Union

CARTER'S RECORD AT HOME

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



WASHINGTON

IT is generally agreed here, by friends and foes alike, that Jimmy Carter's first-year round of accomplishments as President of the United States is remarkably attenuated. Most of the major items on his campaign shopping list—tax reform, middle-income housing, national health insurance—have not even been fully drafted, much less legislated; and some of the significant measures he managed to send to Congress either died aborning (electoral reform, the \$50 tax rebate) or else have been so mutilated by his fellow Democrats on the Hill as to become unrecognizable (energy). As Nicholas von Hoffman wickedly observed in a recent *Washington Post* column, it looks

like Carter may be a one-term President, but no one is certain when that term will begin.

Part of Carter's trouble seems to be his contradictory philosophies: He is a mild social liberal but a fierce fiscal conservative, and his obsession with balancing the budget invariably conquers his progressive instincts. Thus he has presented Congress with a scheme for welfare "reform" which, if passed, would lead to a net loss for millions of current welfare recipients. It is essentially an engineer's creation—less is more—that streamlines the system, stretches the dollar, but in no way solves the basic problem of a stingy welfare distribution mechanism.

Carter's welfare plan includes a device to force able-bodied recipients (including welfare mothers) into low-wage jobs, but that is about as deep a commitment to full employment as he has been willing to make. If the enactment of his energy-crisis solutions are, for him, "the moral equivalent of war," then his attitude toward the Humphrey-Hawkins full-employment bill must seem to many the moral equivalent of surrender. Having halfheartedly endorsed the measure on

several occasions, Carter spent most of the year hoping it would go away. When it didn't he negotiated a compromise with the bill's Congressional sponsors and with organized labor. But the agreement keeps the bath and throws away the baby; it would merely commit Congress *in principle* to the goal of full employment without spelling out a specific program that could actually take us to that Promised Land. Anyway, Congress had already pledged itself to a goal of full employment. It did so in 1946, seven years before the first Eisenhower recession.

All this has left large segments of the public bemused and leaderless. The citizen may hope for bread-and-butter assistance in his daily life—a decent job, a sensibly-priced house, a little protection from the rapacity of the health-care clan—yet all he gets are some uninspiring lectures on inflation and moral equivalencies.

The President's energy package is a confusing case in point. By making a huge televised fuss over the alleged crisis, he staked his prestige on a legislative program that Congress did not want and the public did not understand. Whatever the 95th Congress ultimately decides to do about energy, the average voter knows only that an unconscionable rise in gas and oil prices is likely to be the upshot. It is a peculiar policy, coming as it does from a President who spends so much time worrying aloud about inflation.

The many contradictory messages emanating from the White House have tended to shift the political center of gravity to the Hill, where the folks are invariably jollier and more generous with Federal dollars. True, the trotaway Congress didn't accomplish a great deal either last year, but much of what it did was achieved on its own initiative, sometimes in spite of the President. Its new minimum wage law exceeded Carter's proposed upper limits, as did its food stamp program and revised system of farm price support. This was a fair show of strength. Things have now reached a point where Speaker of the House Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. is being por-

trayed in the press as a consummate statesman, when only a couple of years ago most observers viewed him as a genial hack from Boston.

The Washington pundits, of course, are having a field day rummaging around the White House vacuum. They are charging the Presidential staff with being Georgian in a public place, and they are making invidious comparisons between Carter and certain of his predecessors. Henry Fairlie, in *Harper's*, longs for the days of Franklin D. Roosevelt, a man who surrounded himself not with technicians like Hamilton Jordan and Jody Powell but with blunderbuss politicians like James Farley and Harold Ickes—with people, that is, who knew the score and relished the game. William Safire, Richard Nixon's posthumous mouthpiece at the *New York Times*, keeps writing about alleged corruption on Pennsylvania Avenue (both ends) and seems sorry he won't have Bert Lance to kick around any more. And Sally Quinn, the ever-insightful gossip columnist for the *Washington Post*, has advised Carter's hardworking staff of shut-ins to emulate the Kennedy clan by getting out to more cocktail parties in Georgetown, there presumably to sample the hostess' booze and the people's pulse.

Poor Jimmy, the world of Washington is too much with him. Try as he might, he lacks the glib charm of a Kennedy, the joyful cunning of an FDR, or the Caligula-like lunacy of a Nixon. In truth, if we must have Presidential parallels, Carter comes closest to being another Grover Cleveland, that decent, conservative and wholly unimaginative Democrat who said on his deathbed, "I have tried so hard to do the right."

The similarities between Carter and Cleveland are discouraging but they may be worth exploring. Like Jimmy, Grover entered the White House determined to restore confidence in government. His first term, 1885-89, got under way during one of the nation's more memorable orgies of corruption, beginning with the Grant Ad-

ministration's Credit Mobilier scandal. Robber barons like John D. Rockefeller owned senators and Cabinet secretaries as surely as they owned stock in Standard Oil, and the entire Federal hierarchy was an open sink of bribery and patronage. Cleveland, an honorable man, wanted to change that. He threw some of the rascals out (but left a lot in, too), gave us a Civil Service System reasonably free of spoilage, and in general con-



GROVER CLEVELAND

ducted the affairs of state with dignity, even with honesty.

IT WAS all very uplifting—and disastrous. For while Cleveland was imposing his notions of clean government at the top—behaving, that is, like an oldtime aristocrat or a member of Common Cause—the rest of the country was going to smash. Millions were still suffering from the 1873 depression and fearing a new one. (It came on schedule, in 1893.) Money was scarce, jobs were scarcer still, and the corporations were riding high.

"The public be damned!" said Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, the railroad magnate, to a reporter in 1883. Cleveland was a kinder man than Vanderbilt but he held essentially to the same creed. "While the people should patriotically and cheerfully

support their government," he explained, "its functions do not include the support of the people."

Nothing in Cleveland's background had prepared him to face up to the unspeakable miseries being endured by so many of his countrymen. The farmers were starving, and Mrs. Mary Ellen Lease, the agrarian radical from Kansas, was urging them to "raise less corn and more HELL," but all Cleveland could say in response was, "Beware of mob action." And when Eugene Debs led the Pullman workers in Illinois out on strike, Cleveland dispatched the National Guard there to shoot down the workers and arrest Debs.

Historian Eric Goldman has pointed out that Cleveland was "a liberal's liberal" of his day, "complete with an abhorrence of corruption and a zeal for local rule ... governmental economy, and economic liberty." But like all Presidents, Cleveland was subject to endless and multiple pressures, "and the pressure from large-scale business interests was easily the most potent.... As a result, liberalism became increasingly a pro-corporation credo."

Cleveland's classic liberalism is easily recognized today as Carter's classic conservatism; and the pressures from corporations are greater than ever, for they have had nearly a century to establish their hegemony over the American political system. Following the pattern of other leaders who focused on government efficiency and honesty rather than on the government's social responsibilities, Carter is more useful to the rich and the powerful than he is to the poor and the vulnerable. His passion to reorganize the bureaucracy—to draw new charts and pencil in fresh lines and boxes—is of a piece with his zeal for orderliness in politics, for planning, for a "master agenda" (his term). So long as the President of the United States prefers to change the form of things and not their substance, then so long will the ghost of Grover Cleveland—and that of Cornelius Vanderbilt—rest easy.