

States of the Union

THE SAME OLD JIMMY CARTER

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

“DEAR FRIEND,” Jimmy Carter wrote to me recently, “I want to take a moment from the hectic pace of the Oval Office to bring you up-to-date on the progress of our Administration and to ask you to become a contributor to the Democratic Party.” I am glad he sent me the letter, because it reminded me that for six months I had been intending to take a moment from the hectic pace of My Career and bring you up-to-date on Jimmy Carter.

Surely you will recall my First Annual Assessment of the Carter Presidency (“Shuffling for a New Deal,” NL, January 31, 1977), in which I drew hopeful comparisons between Jimmy and Franklin D. Roosevelt. And some of you may have stayed around long enough to see my Second Annual Assessment (“Carter’s Record at Home,” NL, January 16, 1978) wherein, my expectations lowered, I likened the President to Grover Cleveland.

Now, in this third weighing of the Carter years, coming after his July 15 speech that was billed as the most important for his political career, I grope for a suitably Oval analogue. Fillmore, Pierce and Buchanan come quickly to mind. They were all one-termers, they

were soon forgotten, and while in office they were unable to inspire enough people to prevent a civil war.

A second executive trio, followed by a second deluge, suggests itself: Harding, Coolidge and Hoover, the three gnomes of normalcy. To be fair, though, Carter is less of a hack than Harding and more of a *mensch* than Coolidge. Herbert Hoover, on the other hand, seems a likely prospect. Like Carter, he was an engineer, a practical man with a naive faith in the efficacy of merely technical solutions to vastly complex problems, like Carter, he revered “rugged individualism”—a term he is said to have invented—as well as his own rugged righteousness, like Carter, he assumed office in the wake of a major political scandal (Teapot Dome), and, like Carter, Hoover had to endure a Congress

that had ceased to follow and an electorate that had ceased to believe.

There are further similarities, too. For instance, the voters who elected Hoover in 1928 did so either because they thought he was conservative or because they thought he was progressive—in other words, no one knew for sure what he was. Businessmen appreciated Hoover’s soundness and practicality, his substantial air. Fundamentalists applauded his four-square endorsement of Prohibition, which he called “a great social and economic experiment, noble in motive and far-reaching in purpose.” And humanitarians liked his performance as the head of the European Relief and Reconstruction Commission following World War I. Mary Ellen Lease, the Kansas populist who had advised farmers to “raise less corn and more hell,” announced during the campaign that Hoover was “one sent by God.”

In the end, of course, God went away. Hoover’s essential conservatism took command, dispelling the public’s confusion and, after the Crash, washing out its hopes for a decisive leader capable of bold action. In *Rendezvous with Destiny*, Eric Goldman has summed up the country’s attitude toward Hoover back then: “It is a chillingly up-to-date passage. ‘Gloomy and restive, the nation watched its President finding reasons for hesitating, mincing ahead to small measures, mumbling promises of recovery. Few were sure what should be done, millions were sure that, whatever should be done, this Administration was not likely to do it.’”

It is true that today’s energy crisis and the galloping inflation that accompanies it are still relatively low on the disaster meter—certainly several notches below the Depression. And Carter, thankfully, has shown no signs of sinking into the black despair that finally engulfed Hoover at the close of his Presidency, when he was heard to mutter, “We are at the end of our string.” But Carter’s string may be running out, too. The popularity polls place him below both Kennedy and Reagan. The other day I heard someone refer to

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the long lines in front of gas stations as "Carter queues," just as the many shantytowns that sprang up in the early '30s were called "Hoovervilles"

Well, as Jimmy himself once noted —when a reporter asked him why only the poor should be deprived of abortions—life is unfair Carter didn't invent the fuel shortage, OPEC and Exxon did Nor did he personally engineer the latest round of inflation, Lyndon Johnson did, with his guns and butter Nevertheless, the President's performance on energy in recent months has done little to allay the public's suspicion that he is, alas, a lost leader, a sovereign as perplexed as his lowliest subject One day he lauds the oil industry for its "sincere efforts" on our behalf, the next day he lashes out at Mobil, calling it "perhaps the most irresponsible company in America"

Again, one moment Jimmy berates us all for not facing up to the crisis, for avoiding "the hard sacrifices" he knows we must ultimately make, the next he cuts the Amtrak budget 43 percent and adds 12 percent to the already bulging Highway Trust Fund "US Planners Expect Auto's Role To Be Unaffected by Gas Scarcity," intones the *New York Times* in a front-page headline Although Amtrak turned away 750,000 passengers last month, the story says, "Administration planners are sure that Americans will stop using passenger trains as soon as the current gasoline shortage subsides" Picture yourself listening to that little news item on your car radio (over WQXR, naturally) while waiting in a Carter queue (A Plains parade? A White House column?)

Such contradictions confirm our feeling that, whatever needs to be done, this Administration is not likely to do it Nor are we reassured when our President, in what appears to have been a carefully choreographed non-event, tells some Congressmen over dinner that he intends to whip Teddy Kennedy's ass Bluster is no substitute for leadership What we want Jimmy to tell us—and *mean* it—is what F D R told us (and meant) after poor Hoover's string ran out That we'd be

OK, that the only thing we had to fear was fear itself, and, most important, that "The people of the United States have not failed In their need they have asked for discipline and direction under leadership They have made me the present instrument of their wishes" Gallup, Roper, Harris—all the measurers of public opinion agree that a solid majority of Americans would prefer gasoline rationing to the present inane scramble

"A voice in the darkness, a knock on the door, / And a word that shall echo forevermore!" That's all we want Instead, we have been getting threats of ass-whippings, soft, post-Watergate imprecations like "bunk" and "baloney," and a succession of querulous complaints about the behavior of practically everyone Congress in general and Teddy in particular, the average gas consumer (for being weak), Menachem Begin (for being strong) About the only people who have escaped Carter's scratchy criticism of late are Anwar Sadat and Leonid Brezhnev Nor did the vague speech he delivered following 10 days of retreat and retrenchment in Camp David, for all the hoopla in the press and on the tube, show signs of any real change

IN FACT, the performance only served to corroborate that in a sense the contradictions in Jimmy's policies and statements, and in the persona he projects onto the stage, do betray a single consistency It also seemed to confirm that James Fallois, Carter's former speechwriter, was correct when he wrote in the *Atlantic* that Carter has no philosophical focus, no broad outlook on the world, and thus lacks a context in which to make judgments and decisions He flits, therefore he flounders I fear we can truthfully say about Carter what Gertrude Stein is alleged to have said about the city of Oakland "There's no *there* there"

The letter he sent me is touchingly characteristic It offers something to everybody, and consequently nothing to anybody He begins by reminding us

that he was chiefly responsible for "the miracle" of the Israeli-Egyptian treaty—a fair claim, and he predicts that a hundred years from now "this treaty may be considered the most significant occurrence during my term of office"—an understandable boast

Then Carter takes up "domestic questions," which turn out to be a litany of rather doubtful triumphs He takes credit, among other things, for "facing up to inflation now" (unlikely), "reducing waste" (unimportant and improbable), "cutting unemployment by one-fourth" (possible), "cutting back on paperwork" (no sign of that yet), "running the government well" after "the last few years of embarrassment" (could that be Watergate?), "strengthening our Armed Forces" (costly and redundant), and lowering taxes (for the rich)

Conspicuously absent from Carter's catalogue of accomplishments, and for obvious reasons, are items pertaining to social welfare, civil liberties, desegregation, ecology, and trust-busting The President does concede that the Democratic party "has always been known as a party of compassion," but then he is sure to quickly add that "in the last two years, we have also proven that we are a party of fiscal responsibility" The truth is, whatever compassion still exists in Washington can be found on the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue Richard Nixon initiated more decent social legislation than has Jimmy Carter

So I won't be contributing to the Democratic party this year—not for the time being anyway, not until Jimmy Carter finds his courage I'm not looking for a man on a horse, just a brave, imaginative man in the White House

Herbert Hoover said it as well as anyone, in *American Individualism* (1922) Progress in our national life, he noted, "can be advanced in no other way than by a willingness to experiment in the remedy of our social faults The failures and unsolved problems of economic and social life can be corrected The solution is a matter of will" Amen