

EXCURSUS I

Richard John Neuhaus on The Grading of Jimmy Carter

Pundits must, of necessity, set arbitrary dates upon which to pund. Otherwise it would appear that offerings of wisdom are gratuitous, occasioned by nothing more than the writer's need to relieve himself of some weighty thought—or his need to put it in writing before he forgets it. Especially when writing about the presidency is it necessary to make such arbitrary dates seem obligatory. Thus we were treated to a rash of somewhat tentative "report cards" after Carter's First Month In Office. The number multiplied for "The First Hundred Days," and one trembles before the deluge of evaluations that will make "The First Thousand Days," a time span now sanctified by the Kennedy legend.

"The First Year" will also be very big. We toyed with the idea of issuing our report card early and beating the deadline by a month. Until it became obvious that, just as Christmas begins commercially the week before Thanksgiving, so the journalistic observation of presidential first years now gets under way in mid-October. Rather than issue a belated report card only one month early, herewith some comment on grades revealed to date.

In fairness it should be remembered that this writer was supportive, some thought too enthusiastically so, of the candidacy and election of Jimmy Carter. As of this writing our support is nuanced but undiminished. It was not suggested here that Carter would exorcise all the demons that afflict the human condition and the American condition in particular. It was expected that he would preside and press with intelligence, integrity, and compassion, and that he just might refurbish a sense of possibility about American domestic life and about America's role in the world. After almost eleven months of Carter in the White House that expectation still seems quite sound.

John Le Carré, the English spy novelist who is coming on very hot this season, recently wrote about the differences between English and American politics: "In English politics and English society we live with the same in-built conviction that promises are by definition empty. Americans of my acquaintance undergo a genuine national rebirth with each Presidential election: no question. Voting day approaches, and shrewd cookies who should know better...walk with a spring in their tread and a twinkle in their eye, because maybe, this time just maybe, the new man...is going to deliver the goods." That sense of possibility is, one suspects, not a mark of naiveté but of mature recognition that without it this kind of social experiment might end up in deep trouble, like England, for example. We know this from experience. It seems unlikely that Americans of

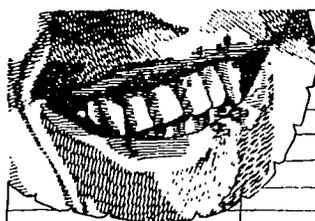
Le Carré's acquaintance walked with a spring in their tread and a twinkle in their eye upon the election of Richard Nixon in 1968.

But Le Carré touches on something that may explain why many of the report cards on Carter so far seem rather downbeat in tone. The brows at Washington desks are furrowed over Carter's slippage (admittedly inevitable) in opinion polls. ("This too will pass" might first have been uttered by whoever received the report on the world's first personal popularity poll.) The sages tell us that *of course* no president maintains the standing he receives in democracy's initial impulse of rallying round the new leader. But when what is supposed to happen "of course" does in fact happen, we are told it is very "worrisome" and are invited to believe it is "cause for concern" among the president's inner circle. Perhaps because we are not in the inner circle, we do not find it worrisome in the least. Nor does it seem likely that anyone in the White House, with the possible exception of whoever is assigned the job of fretting about opinion polls (that kind of work does funny things to one's perspective), is very alarmed.

The spring-treaded and twinkle-eyed of last January seem to be reaching a consensus that Mr. Carter may not be so competent after all. This despite the touting of his submarine-conditioned efficiency and iron discipline that, it was heretofore agreed among the pressroom fraternity, made Carter the fastest learner the Oval Office had sheltered in many a decade. Russell Baker, erstwhile humorist, titles his worried and patronizing column "The Education of Jimmy Carter." It seems that Carter's chief problem is that he doesn't know much about government in general and Washington in particular (or maybe government and Washington amount to the same thing). Carter is plagued by "flaws of innocence," writes Baker. He just doesn't understand how things are done. For example, he offered three major domestic programs—energy, tax reform, and welfare—when he should have known that "to get any single one in a full Congressional term would have been an astonishing coup for a new President....To get all three unmingled is the stuff of Presidential pipe dreams."

The logic seems to be that it's all right to be elected on the promise of taking a new tack but, once in office, the mark of "responsibility" is to play by the old rules. If it would happen that Carter got one of the above-mentioned programs through Congress in acceptable shape, would Mr. Baker acclaim it "an astonishing coup"? And if it took two congressional terms to get even one through, which Mr. Baker implies is the norm, would Carter be credited with a satisfying achievement? Not very likely. What, when done by others, would be deemed success, when done by Carter is portrayed as a compromised and tattered rescue operation, a frantic effort to save something from the disaster of his exuberant incompetence.

One does not wish to focus unfairly on Mr. Baker. His themes and logic are by now quite general in the report cards we've seen. When pressed, such analysts defend the low grades they give on the grounds that Jimmy promised so much more. No doubt Mr. Carter has used hyperbole on occasion and made other mistakes, as what politician hasn't? But it seems odd that political reporters who pride themselves on being skeptical, even cynical, about political rhetoric should feel justified in taking Jimmy Carter so literally. Surely it ought to be understood that Mr. Carter's political rhetoric against the usual political rhetoric is still political rhetoric. As such it is to be weighed against the realities of possibility and performance. What is missing from so many of these analyses is the sympathetic entertainment of the possibility that Mr. Carter knows what he is doing: ask for three, get one; ask for six, get two. And if the Congress seems sluggish and recalcitrant, Mr. Carter no doubt remembers, even if the columnists don't, that another recent president, Harry Truman, did very well politically by berating a "do-nothing Congress."



		CARTER, James		
		2	3	4
U.S. GOVERNMENT	C+			
ENERGY	D-			
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS	A+			
RHETORIC	B			
DENTAL HYGIENE		ABSENCES <input type="checkbox"/> TARDY <input type="checkbox"/> <i>excellent teeth!</i> <i>Promoted to second year</i> <i>country</i>		

Mr. Carter has missed a few beats, no doubt, but the rhythm of the pace still comes through clearly. Tax reform is admittedly a long-term struggle, and his proposals probably represent as much as mortals can do in trying to write straight with crooked lines. The antidependency, pro-work, and pro-family directions of his welfare proposals are right on target. Of course they may not do much toward getting the 40 per cent of unemployed black youth into a productive job track, but that depends on other measures aimed at busting open present barriers to the job market, such as educational certification, minimum wage, and insurance regulations that artificially make so many of the unemployed "unemployable." It is not unreasonable to believe that the Carter people know that after surgery on the existing welfare system the next phase is cracking open the job market.

As to energy, Carter's proposals are in deep and, we believe, deserved trouble. The basic problem is that his program is so much more geared to conservation than production, to the politics of necessity rather than to the politics of possibility. The thrust of his program is an anomaly; it doesn't fit

the commonsensical "can do" spirit of the American people that Carter exploited so effectively in his campaign and in his handling of other issues. It is troubling that the only people who seem almost entirely happy with the Carter administration are the members of the Church of the Wilderness, who call us to repentance before the arrival of Environmental Armageddon. Carter's "moral equivalent of war" smacks too much of Lyndon Johnson's talk about "hunkering down" during the Vietnam years. Americans are not a hunkering-down people, especially not when they think the war is unreal or unnecessary. So, were we issuing a report card, which we are not, the energy program would be the only thing near a D-minus on the domestic record.

As to the economy in general, if Milton Friedman is right, the only thing governments do well in that area is wage war and up inflation. We are not at war and, as of this writing, inflation is on the decline. That is about as much as our ignorance of economics permits us to say.

On international questions continued support, if not enthusiasm, seems warranted. The human rights keystone in U.S. foreign policy remains a politically brilliant and historically significant achievement. Although the administration has become less vocal about human rights in some forums, there is no reason to believe the keystone is not firmly in place. On arms negotiations Carter has put the disarmament imperative on the agenda in a way that it has not been there since the Kennedy years, and that is good. With initiatives regarding Africa, and South Africa in particular, the administration has belatedly assumed a whole new set of positive responsibilities.

After a few thoughtless misstatements about majority rule in South Africa it is hoped the administration is now on a steadier course of firm pressure toward greater racial justice in that tortured land—a justice that surely includes the protection of minority (white and Asian) rights. Pretoria's current toughening of its line is disturbing, but that could well be an effort to "get its act together" as a prelude toward gradual but substantive change. Gradualism, it is assumed here, is the only alternative to genocidal war in that part of the world. Washington is and should be out of phase with Pretoria on how gradual gradual change should be. The level of necessary tension between Pretoria and Washington is not yet fine tuned, and that tuning will require a great deal of prudence. But the tension, in various forms and changing levels, will be a major factor in U.S. foreign policy for the foreseeable future. Whether or not we welcome that prospect, it seems essential to American relations with Africa and the Third World, and it is essential to American credibility and ideals, especially with respect to human rights.

As to other issues, we hope and expect the Panama Canal treaties will get through, although perhaps not without some minor renegotiations. We

very much hope Taiwan will feel more assured about its de facto independence a year from now. The absence of administration signals on that score is deeply troubling. Although we cannot go on to survey the whole world in terms of Carter's performance, the Middle East cannot go unmentioned. Earlier this fall there was loud nervousness about the Soviet-American statement on a Geneva conference. The noise seemed excessive. The idea of a more or less permanent Geneva conference as a further forum to explore possibilities is attractive. The public strains between Washington and the Israeli government, especially *this* Israeli government, seem altogether predictable. Carter has repeatedly said he will not "commit political suicide" by letting down Israel, and there is no reason to doubt that he indeed knows it would be political suicide. Giving the Begin government free rein would mean letting down both Israel and the world's hope for peace in the Mideast. The current checks, and the resulting tensions, seem appropriate.

The pundits may be right; maybe at the end of The First Year the administration seems incompetent, fumbling, devoid of style or substance. But it doesn't look that way from here. Jack Valenti got into Bartlett's Familiar Quotations with his remark about sleeping better at night because Lyndon Johnson was his president, and we don't envy Mr. Valenti his fame. But there is, as Le Carré said, something like a spring in our tread and a twinkle in our eye, and if they are not caused by it, neither are they diminished by the fact that Jimmy Carter is in the White House at the start of the Year of Our Lord 1978.

EXCURSUS II

Charles Angell on

Difficult Days Ahead for Jewish-Christian Relations

There are troubled days ahead both for the religious dialogue of American Christians with Jews and for the political relationship between the governments of the United States and Israel. The new Begin government in Israel is formulating policies that are in direct conflict with the stated position of the American churches and present U.S. governmental policy. Begin, like the PLO, wants all of the old Palestine Mandate. These two extremes mutually exclude each other and have, as a matter of fact, denied the existence of each other in the past. The clear position of both the American churches and the Carter administration is that there are two recognizable people in the Palestine area—Israelis and Palestinians—and it is only through mutual recognition, mutual negotiation, and mutual compromise that a peaceful settlement will be achieved.

When, in 1947, the United Nations recommended a partition of the old Palestine Mandate west of the Jordan River, the Jews were to get 56 per cent of the country and the Palestinians the rest; but after the 1949 hostilities the new State of Israel ended up with 77 per cent of the land within the cease-fire lines that it occupied. These lines held in general until Israeli forces conquered the remaining 23 per cent in the 1967 war. It is this remnant—23 per cent of the old Palestine—that is now being suggested as a homeland for the Palestinian people and which the State of Israel refuses to relinquish. There are roughly three million Israeli Jews and three million Palestinians (a half-million within the 1967 borders of the State of Israel who are citizens of that country, a million on the West Bank and Gaza, and a million and a half scattered throughout the Arab states).

American Jews have long called upon the churches here to "recognize the Legitimacy of the State of Israel." But which Israel is it that we are called upon to legitimate? The 1948 Israel with 56 per cent of the country? the 1967 Israel with 77 per cent of the country? the 1977 Israel with 100 per cent?

Historically, American Christians have been vocal on both sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict. On the Arab side there have been many of our churches, especially those who worked with Palestinian refugees in the camps of Jordan and Lebanon, who were strong in their demand that justice be done for a dispersed and disinherited people. Even Pope Paul in his Christmas message of 1975 said: "Even if we are well aware of the tragedy not so long ago that has compelled the Jewish people to seek a secure and protected garrison in a sovereign and independent state of their own—and because we are properly aware of this—we would like to invite the children of this people to recognize the right and legitimate aspirations of another people which also has suffered for a long time, the people of Palestine." But many Christian Arab apologists went much farther, refusing to see legitimacy in a State of Israel.

Still other Christians, especially those engaged in Christian-Jewish dialogue, conscious of the tragedy of the Holocaust that had occurred in the face of what must be termed at best inadequate Christian opposition, and reflecting upon the long, sad history of Christian anti-Semitism, championed the cause of a sovereign Israel as the necessary expression of a resurrected people. Some of these Christians tended to equate support for Israel with support for whatever the government of Israel said or did. A number of them were guilt-ridden mouthpieces for press handouts of the Israeli information ministry.

But the record of the American churches in their official statements regarding the Middle East is a different picture indeed. Recently I had occasion to survey all the statements the American churches published in recent years on Israel, and I was tremendously impressed by the striking consensus in what they have to say. While I think it fair to state that specific recognition of Palestinian nationhood