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## OPINIONDECLARATIONS

# Jimmy Carter's 'Malaise' Speech Aged Well

He aptly described the demoralization that preceded today's hatred and polarization.



By Peggy Noonan [Follow](#)

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I've been meaning for the longest time to write about Jimmy Carter's "malaise" speech, long derided by history and cited to explain his landslide drubbing by Ronald Reagan 16 months later.

It was, in fact, a good speech—brave, original and pertinent to the moment. It failed because he was exactly the man who couldn't give it, and he gave it at exactly the moment it couldn't be heard.

The backdrop was an air of crisis. Summer 1979: The oil crisis, inflation entering double digits, interest rates rising, unemployment too. There was widespread fear America had lost its economic mojo, perhaps forever. "Running out of gas," John Updike's Rabbit Angstrom thought as he surveyed the landscape in "Rabbit Is Rich." The traffic on Pennsylvania's Route 111 was "thin and scared compared to what it used to be." "The people out there are getting frantic, they know the great American ride is ending."

That was exactly the mood.

Into it came the president and his speech. He never used the word malaise—that's the word people used to damningly describe it. He spoke, in slow tempo, for 33 minutes, from the Oval Office on the evening of July 15.

A speech planned for 10 days before had been canceled because he meant to talk about the energy crisis but had come to think his real subject was why we couldn't work together to solve it. Our "true problems" were deeper than gasoline lines.

He'd been meeting at Camp David with thinkers from "every segment of society" and wanted to share what they'd said. A southern governor had told him: "Mr. President, you are not leading this nation—you're just managing the government." A citizen had urged him to change tack: "Don't talk to us about

politics or the mechanics of government, but about an understanding of our common good.” It was remarkable to hear an American president critique himself in this way, through the words of others.

He’d concluded America was suffering “a crisis of confidence,” and “all the legislation in the world” couldn’t resolve it. “We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.” We used to be a confident country; we breathed it in the air. That confidence “supported everything else—public institutions and private enterprise, our own families, and the very Constitution of the United States.”

Our nature as a people was changing. “Too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns.” But owning things won’t satisfy “our longing for meaning.” We’re voting less, producing less, saving less. We’ve grown pessimistic, and disrespectful of our institutions.

It didn’t happen overnight. It came gradually, “over the last generation” with its shocks and tragedy—the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Vietnam, Watergate. “These wounds are still very deep. They have never been healed.”

Our people see the federal government as an incompetent “island,” apart from the main. Congress is “twisted and pulled” by well-financed “special interests.” Extreme positions are “defended to the last vote, almost to the last breath by one unyielding group or another.”

Watching in a radio studio as a young writer at CBS News, I thought: That is true. As I watched again this week I thought: That was prescient. Our worry is about hatred and polarization; he was describing the demoralization that preceded it.

We have to remember who we are, he said. We are the heirs of those who faced world wars and the Great Depression. We have that in us as “the same Americans who just 10 years ago put a man on the moon.” We’ve come together to fight for racial equality. Our choice is “fragmentation and self-interest” or “common purpose and the restoration of American values.”

At the end, poignantly: “Whenever you have a chance, say something good about our country.”

*Redrawn and reconceived: that speech would have made a good farewell*

redrawn and reconceived, that speech would have made a good farewell address. I suppose in its way it was. Soon after the hostages were taken in Iran, and that was that. But Mr. Carter had captured some hard truths about his era and put them forth in a daring way.

Here is why the speech didn't succeed. He thought America was suffering a crisis of confidence. It was. But the more immediate problem was that it was losing confidence in *him*. Two and a half years into his presidency, people were beginning to doubt his ability to lead. They didn't see him as appropriately pondering events; they thought he'd lost control of events. In the summer of '79 they didn't want sensitive dilating on the quandary. They thought: Save that for when the crisis passes.

Here is a thing in politics, and in life, that is very important, crucial as you go forward. From the Scots-language poet Robert Burns: "O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us / *To see oursels as others see us!*"

What a boon and help in life to have an accurate sense of how the world perceives you. You see yourself as struggling to be heard; the world perhaps sees you as always interrupting. You see yourself as beset and erect strategies to counter this; the world sees you as combative.

This is especially true in politics in a democracy. Jimmy Carter justly had pride in his personal talents—a logical mind, first-rate scientific and mathematical abilities. But he saw himself as politically astute in ways he wasn't.

It can't be said of any man who reaches the American presidency that he isn't good at politics. But Mr. Carter lacked talents that might have ensured his political longevity. One was understanding his exact position with the public. It had been evolving. He was elected in 1976 on a wave of idealism—he wanted a government as good as the people, he located the cynicism that had captured Washington during Watergate. "I will never lie to you," he said. He was clean, a small-town Baptist Sunday-school teacher—sincere, provincial in the best sense. He had a big smile. He wore it so often there was a newspaper cartoon—a bedroom at night, complete darkness lit only by brilliant teeth locked in a grin. "Jimmy stop it," says his wife, Rosalynn.

But once in the White House, with problems piled high, people wanted not a mood or sentiment but a plan—a philosophically coherent outline of what to do. There he struggled.

“All political careers end in failure.” Yet his didn’t. After the White House he went home to his plain house in Plains, Ga. He didn’t swan around Martha’s Vineyard, didn’t issue occasional pronouncements while really focusing on amassing great personal wealth. He would be a citizen. He set himself to doing good—building houses for the homeless, mediating disputes, curing infectious diseases. He taught Sunday school.

He had felt called to the presidency. His true calling was to be an ex-president, one of the most constructive and inspiring in our history.

What a good man who tried so hard to understand America and help the world.

President Jimmy Carter delivers his ‘malaise’ speech on television, July 15, 1979.

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