

# President Wobble

Is the Carter Presidency a failure?

There have been plenty of reasons to wonder — and even wince — since that Saturday in March 1977 when Walter Cronkite asked the new President whether the job was harder than expected. No, Jimmy Carter said. It was about the same as being governor of Georgia but more interesting because it included foreign affairs. “I’ve a big globe in my office next to my chair and . . . I study about those countries . . .”

Wobbles and timidity quickly became evident. Within weeks of taking office, Mr. Carter abandoned his \$50 tax rebate, even before informing his Treasury Secretary. Within months, his “comprehensive” welfare reform plan turned out to mean merely one that would not cost anything. Admirably, he summoned the nation to sacrifice for energy independence — but then told some Congressmen not to worry, the sacrifices wouldn’t amount to much.

Again and again, Jimmy Carter has seemed to be all sail, no boat. What did he do when his popularity sank in July 1979? He fired half his Cabinet and blamed the public for succumbing to malaise. Soon after came the affair of Andrew Young. A President reliant on blacks and Jews left both groups at each other’s throats for weeks before vaguely acknowledging that it was he who wanted Mr. Young dismissed. Why, later, did the United States vote against Israel in the United Nations? A “communications failure.”

And yet, for all the wobbling, Jimmy Carter has forthrightly, often bravely, upheld intelligent and hu-

mane values on a roster of issues. He has been devoted in the pursuit of strategic arms control and nuclear non-proliferation. He has, generally, stood for human rights; America’s friends in Europe may not always prize his competence, but many in Latin America and Africa extol his tenacity. He courageously faced down snarling demagoguery on the Panama Canal, on Taiwan and on Rhodesia. He risked much for Camp David and he has supported Israel warmly while prodding it toward further negotiations.

Mr. Carter’s economic policy amounts to nothing more than muddling through. But isn’t muddling through just where economics is today? And all the easy criticism about his having no energy policy is hugely unjust. There were false starts, sputtering and amateurism. Yet Jimmy Carter did achieve the two most important conceivable energy goals — decontrolling the price of natural gas and oil. And then he induced Congress to enact a big synthetic fuel program and a windfall oil tax.

However obdurate his support for Bert Lance (and Brother Billy), the President has made excellent appointments to office, especially the courts, and, to his profit, given Vice President Mondale a wide charter. He has been sensitive to the rightful claims of women and minorities. He reformed Civil Service. He has struck a sensible middle course on deregulation and protection of the environment. His urban policies often involve more creative arithmetic than adequate dollars, but are founded on sympathetic principles.

Jimmy Carter has failed utterly in the role of Presidential teacher, inspiring few and infuriating many. But he has had notable successes in the role of Presidential manager, and the shadows of the first ought not darken the truth of the second.

**The New York Times**

Published: October 26, 1980  
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