
William F. Gavin

Jimmy Carter's Rite of Passage

It was an ominous Inauguration Week: the city lay frozen, shades of Joe McCarthy stirred, and the new President remained a mystery to the pundits.

In January, bitter cold and Jimmy Carter—in that order—came to Washington. Washington commuters, who break down and cry when it rains, screeched and bumped their way along the area's ice-slick roads and bridges in a frenzy of despair and anger. The cold weather hit most of the nation, but only in Washington was it seen as a personal affront. In a city used to moderate winters, God's meteorological eccentricities are not appreciated.

For Theodore C. Sorensen, corporate lawyer, former Presidential aide, and the only self-proclaimed pacifist ever nominated to be head of his country's intelligence agency, the weather must have seemed positively balmy in comparison to the reception he received before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. For reasons still not clear, Jimmy Carter thought Sorensen would be a good choice to head the Central Intelligence Agency. Members of the Committee thought otherwise. Before Sorensen was to appear, they let it be known that a former conscientious objector and Kennedy *apparatchik* who left the White House in 1964 with seven boxes of classified documents just might not be the man to inspire confidence, both in the nation and among allies, as CIA chief.

I have never met Sorensen but his public appearances make me believe he missed his calling. The icy stare, the prim, tight line of the mouth, the quiet voice always under control, the grim facial expression that says someone, somewhere is boring him and had better stop—surely these would have made Sorensen a top character actor specializing in sinister roles. I can see him portraying one of those cultured SS officers we used to see in films made during World War II: "I myself prefer Goethe and Shakespeare. But I am forced to work with Gestapo barbarians. We have ways—*unpleasant ways*—of making you talk..."

Columnist Mary McGrory, no enemy of Sorensen, described him as "stiff-necked and wintry." This is a properly lady-like way of saying that he is viewed by many in Washington as unendurably arrogant, not

to mention highly partisan. The questions that had been raised about his qualifications, taken one by one, need not have ruined his chances for confirmation. But placed in the context of his history as a Camelot commando, and given his incurable case of stiff-neck, these questions doomed Sorensen. Both he and Carter found this out too late to avoid embarrassment. Sorensen appeared before the Committee, read a speech in which he neither apologized nor explained, and then said he was quitting.

The *New York Times* wept, gnashed its teeth, poured ashes over its head and, amidst sobs, said Sorensen deserved "full, personal vindication." It was left to Senator George McGovern to provide the most original excuse for Sorensen's failure. "The ghost of Joe McCarthy stalks the land," said McGovern. This led one Congressional aide to suggest that Sorensen's chances might have been better if Carter had provided him with an exorcist. In any event, perhaps the time has come for the formation of the "Ad Hoc Committee to Grant Amnesty to Joe McCarthy's Ghost," a poor shade regularly blamed for calamities which devout liberals cannot explain by natural means.

Sorensen himself said he felt as if he had been "blind-sided by a truck." But his humiliating failure to be confirmed recalls what Péguy once wrote: when a man dies he does not die of a disease—he dies of his whole life. Could it be that Sorensen forgot—or Carter never knew—that Washington is a place of long memories as well as long knives? The defeat came to Carter only three days before the Inauguration, and Carterologists in the press and in Congress wondered if this was an isolated goof or a sign of things to come.

But not even the Sorensen fiasco could spoil Jimmy's big day. The weather cooperated and the big crowds poured in. The night before the Inauguration, traffic in the city was tied up even more than usual because of thousands of Inaugural visitors' cars blocking roadways or otherwise illegally parked, either out of desperation or calculation. This sort of thing enrages the resident bureaucrats, but Inauguration Day serves to remind them

every four years that Washington doesn't belong to them anyway.

Carter's walk along Pennsylvania Avenue was very popular. Visitors who jammed the halls and committee meeting rooms and Congressional offices in the House and Senate Office Buildings talked about the walk much more than they did about Carter's speech, which was delivered in that curious, halting Carter style, with pauses in unlikely places giving the eerie impression that he is always speaking over a faulty public address system that conks out every few seconds.

So, Jimmy Carter is President and as this is written the deep-thinkers in the press have written their Sunday-after-Inauguration think pieces telling us the meaning of it all. I do not know the meaning of it all. Carter remains my leading candidate for "Strangest American Political Figure of the Century." I leave to psycho-historians and other adepts of the occult arts the difficulties of plumbing the psychic depths of the man who boasts he read *War and Peace* at age twelve. Whatever strange fish swim in the Carter stream of consciousness, he will be faced with a number of difficult situations, none of which he can deal with without getting hurt. He has promised a balanced budget before his Administration is over, a reduction of the unemployment rate to three percent, "simplification" of welfare laws, a reduction of from five to seven billion dollars in the defense budget, creation of a Department of Education...the list goes on and on. No one believes any of this, of course, except the groups to whom promises were made and they will believe nothing else.

So, he will be bombarded with requests from liberals who want cuts in defense spending and more money for the arts, left-wing activists who, when they hear the word "gun," reach for their culture. He will also have the enmity of the conservatives and the watch-and-wait, cautious enmity of members of his own party who lost to him in the primaries and who now suffer from peanuts envy.

But perhaps too much is being made about both his "mysterious" quality and the problems he will inevitably face.

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Presidents are neither born nor made; they create themselves as they go on. If this be existentialism, Carter (who no doubt read Sartre at age four) will surely make the most of it. Whatever else he may be, he's not shy or unambitious. In six months or so we'll forget we ever saw Carter as mysterious. But what will we know then

that we don't know now? A few things: Carter will have been savaged by the media, betrayed by one-time political allies, tested by the Russians, and challenged by Congress. One morning he will awake and discover he cannot remember how it was, standing there in the winter light, looking out at the multitudes

awaiting his inaugural speech. He will desperately try to recapture that moment. But four major decisions will have to be made by noon. So he will go downstairs to work. And on that day, whenever it comes—and it will come—we will learn all we ever have to know about Jimmy Carter. □

THE NATION'S PULSE

by
Peter J. Rusthoven



Jerry Ford

On January 20 of this year, James Earl Carter, Jr., repeated the oath adopted some 190 years ago by the Constitutional Convention and took office as the Nation's 39th Chief Executive. Mr. Carter's inauguration was, on any fair appraisal, far from the most inspiring ever witnessed on these shores. Indeed, to judge from all the fluttering in the press, the day's most noteworthy feature was the new President's decision to walk, not ride, in his inaugural parade—a situation which led William Safire to comment, in the *New York Times*, that if Carter's major accomplishment of the day was being a pedestrian, his address certainly partook of that quality as well. But be that as it may, the Carter inaugural also displayed another quality which, no matter how often remarked, remains among the most significant aspects of our constitutional republic—namely, the orderly, dignified, and peaceful transfer of executive authority. And it is to Mr. Carter's credit that his first statement as President was a gracious nod of thanks to the man who, less than two and one-half years ago, assumed office at a time when order, dignity, and peacefulness were less associated with the White House than at any time in memory.

It is already difficult to remember how troubled and disturbed the Nation seemed in August of 1974, when Gerald Ford became President. To be sure, no one has forgotten the Watergate affair, or the first resignation of an American President. But

for most of us, I suspect, it requires a conscious effort to recall in full detail these events of so very recent history. The daily, painful trauma of more than a year's duration—with its unending series of fresh accusations and revelations, of acrimonious exchanges between an aggressive and often less-than-fair press and a defensive and often less-than-honest President—all this has faded, in large measure, from the national consciousness.

That it has done so in such a relatively short period of time is no small tribute to the efforts of Gerald Ford. Without seeking the office, and with little time to prepare for its responsibilities, Ford nevertheless approached his duties with courage, integrity, and no little degree of ability. He did not possess the so-called "charisma" of a John Kennedy, a dubious qualification that fawning political commentators had extolled until they sounded like a collection of stringers for movie magazines. Nor was his the backroom maneuvering and horse-trading savvy of a Lyndon Johnson, whose skill in these areas was so admired for a time by media amateurs who fancied themselves experts in *realpolitik*. Instead, Ford, more than any President since Harry Truman, brought to the Oval Office a deep regard for those simple and basic values on which our civilization and our constitutional republic depend—values such as honesty and decency, self-discipline and individual responsibility, respect for others and for one's self, and all those other attributes which collectively constitute character. In the conduct both of affairs of state and of his own life, Ford daily

demonstrated that regard; and it is not too much to say that conduct of that sort was precisely and preeminently what the nation needed.

Mr. Ford, to be sure, warrants his share of credit in more specific areas as well. The pardon of his predecessor was a courageous, compassionate, and far-sighted act—and will, I believe, be so viewed by the conventional wisdom of a future and, one hopes, less strident era. His program for Vietnam draft evaders and resisters likewise displayed compassion; and unlike the plan pronounced by his successor, justly required those who refused to serve to earn their readmission to the privileges of full citizenship. Persistent vetoes of the sillier legislative offerings of the most adolescent Congress in our history have undoubtedly spared us much future hassle and grief. Ford's responses to Angola and to the Mayaguez affair were the responses one hopes will always be forthcoming from an American President—but were particularly gratifying in this time when so many attempt to use Vietnam as an argument for a posture of perpetual impotence. And some of his appointments—such as Daniel Moynihan at the United Nations—stand unsurpassed.

There are, of course, blemishes on the Ford record. Our interests were, from almost any perspective, little advanced by the Helsinki agreement. Given a choice between retaining Henry Kissinger at State and James Schlesinger at Defense, I believe that a different conclusion was called for. One cannot help but be staggered by the federal deficits of recent

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