

## OUR MOST INEFFECTUAL POSTWAR PRESIDENT

by Tad Szulc

**"T**HE GOVERNMENT," Jimmy Carter told Congress in his State of the Union Message last January 19, "can't set our goals; it cannot define our vision." Carter clearly did not intend it that way, but—ironically—the statement summed up the overwhelming problem of his presidency: a lack of leadership that is turning him into our most ineffectual postwar President.

It is both sad and rather surprising that it should be so. Jimmy Carter was elected to the White House on the promise of an "open administration" attuned to the people's needs and aspirations. His election was a reaction against the Nixon years (Gerald Ford having failed to instill a spirit of real change), and as the President put it in his State of the Union address, he wanted a "true partnership between government and the people."

What, then, has gone wrong in such a short time? How did Jimmy Carter, unquestionably a highly intelligent, motivated, and sensitive man, squander away the goodwill with which he came into office? Why is his natural constituency—the liberals, intellectuals, blue-collar workers, farmers, Jews, and blacks, who form the basis of his dream to refashion a Rooseveltian coalition—so disenchanted with him while the business community—which has not developed the slightest confidence in his administration—now fears a recession and wage and price controls?

Further, why is this Democratic President unable to win support from a heavily Democratic Congress to the point where the two branches of government have lost rapport, finding themselves in virtual legislative paralysis?

And given the professional caliber of the men and women Carter has brought together, why is American foreign policy going so awry, with the United States now at serious odds with such traditional allies as Israel, West Germany, and Japan? Why is Carter's international image so unconvincing and, in fact, worsening with every foreign trip he makes?

The best available answer, with Carter now well into his

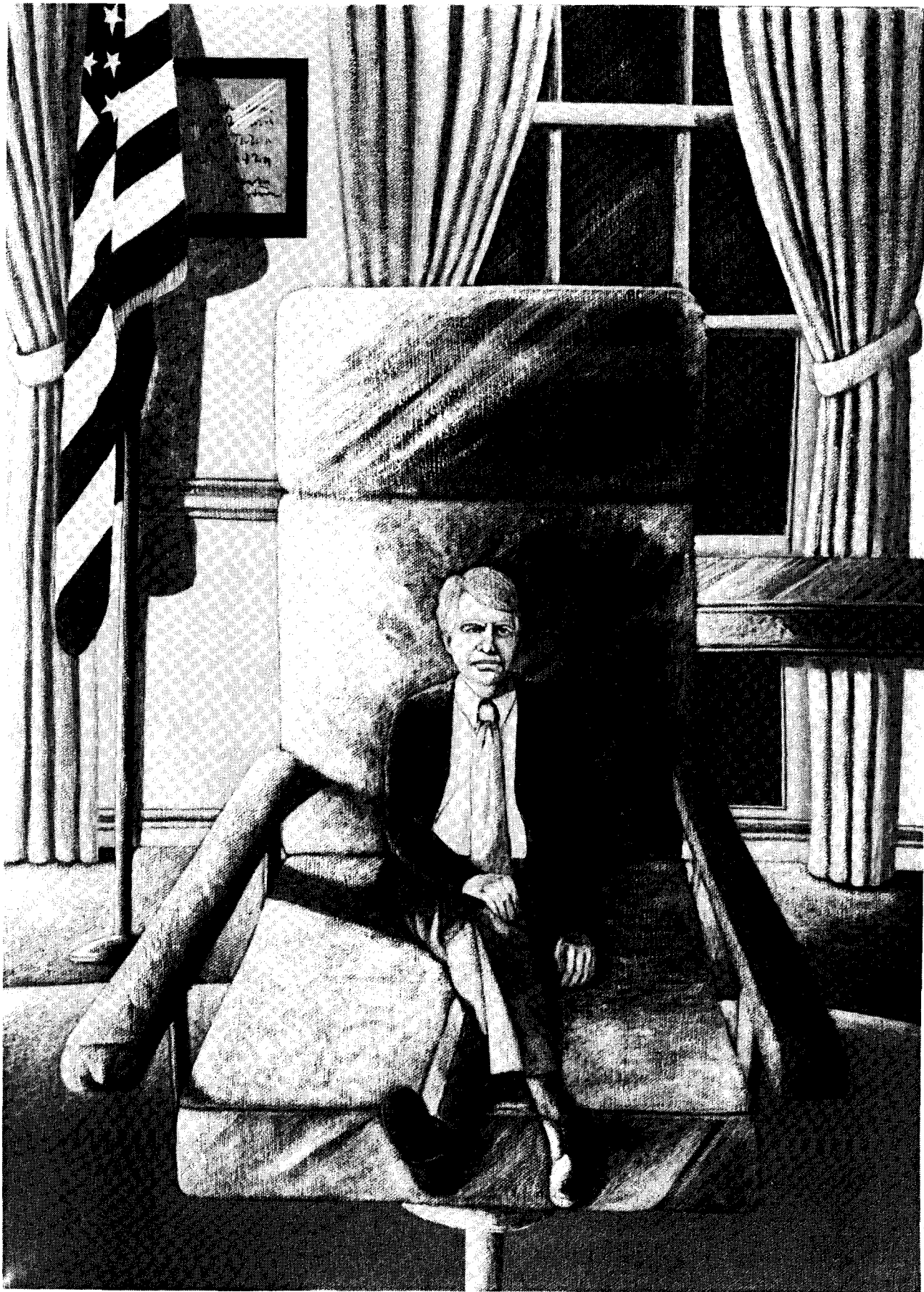
second year, is that he suffers from an ever-deepening crisis of domestic and international trust, a crisis caused, in turn, as much by his own attitudes—political contradictions and inconsistencies—and the image projected by his family and personal friends as by the fact that, demonstrably, his long-range policies are not working in most areas. His Cabinet is strangely ineffectual and so is his White House staff.

Distrust of Carter is most visible in Congress. Senator Henry M. Jackson, of Washington, one of the most powerful and outspoken Democrats on foreign policy and energy issues, said openly in mid-March that the President has had "rough sledding" and needs help. He described Carter's advisers as "sycophants" and said that the President was afflicted by "abulia" (an abnormal inability to act or to make decisions).

Senator George S. McGovern, of South Dakota, the leading Senate liberal, keeps complaining that Carter, despite his campaign promises, has turned his back on America's needy. Congressman William Cohen, a Republican from Maine who has supported Carter on many liberal issues (and who is running this year for a Democratic-held Senate seat), said in a recent interview, "The basic reason that many in Congress are disenchanted with the Carter administration is that there has been such a great disparity between what was professed and what has been practiced."

The public reaction, as expressed by a Gallup poll taken early in February, showed a 51 percent approval of Carter's early handling of his job. For a comparable period in office, Eisenhower had a 68 percent approval; Kennedy, 78 percent; Johnson, 69 percent; and Nixon, 56 percent.

The President's only major tangible foreign policy triumph—and, for that matter, legislative victory—was the Senate's ratification in mid-March of the treaty providing for the neutrality of the Panama Canal after the year 2000, when the United States is to relinquish jurisdiction over the Canal zone. The treaty was approved with a single vote to spare





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over the required two-thirds majority—it was 68 to 32, with uncertainty over the outcome lasting until the final day. Decisive votes were cast by senators who had concluded along with the White House that rejection of the treaty would totally undermine the presidency in the conduct of foreign affairs in general.

The companion treaty, actually turning over the Canal to Panama in the year 2000, was to go to the Senate in late April; Carter was confident that under the circumstances it too would be ratified. No such confidence exists, however, in the ratification of a new Strategic Arms Limitation Agreement (SALT) with the Soviet Union—even assuming that one will be signed in 1978. SALT is unpopular in the Senate, and in this election year, Carter's foreign policy credit on Capitol Hill was exhausted with the Panama votes.

The striking thing about the problem is that Jimmy Carter has not been guilty of any serious offense—any identifiable Nixon-type act or any catastrophic error. The 110-day coal strike was the only major crisis during his first 15 months in the Oval Office, and though it was finally settled, there was controversy whether the President should not have intervened before the situation became critical.

What is more, the United States is at peace with the world, and the President has no Bay of Pigs or Vietnam to worry about. By objective standards, the economy has not fared badly during Carter's first year or so: Unemployment has diminished (though not as much so for blacks), and inflation has been kept fairly well in check (though it has begun to rise most dangerously this year).

The fact that the stock market was at a three-year low after a year of the new presidency was more a reflection of general unease with the Carter administration—an indefinable and elusive factor that nevertheless may soon lead to trouble—than it was of underlying economic conditions.

The depreciation of the dollar (it fell 21 percent against the Swiss franc between August 1977 and March 1978) has, of course, increased domestic inflation. Like the stock market slump, this depreciation also appears to result less from basic economic incapacity than from international distrust of the Carter administration: Clearly, our petroleum-linked trade deficits are not the only reason for the dollar's drop. Announced in mid-March, a much-touted new accord with West Germany to use the powerful mark to support the dollar failed to arrest the slide. World currency dealers simply continued to distrust the United States. And with the dollar writhing on the floor, the value of gold has been soaring: It is mistrust of the greenback that has made gold hoarders crawl out of the woodwork. By the same token, foreign oil producers are no longer sure they want to accept dollars for their oil.

Interestingly, Jimmy Carter is not disliked as a man by a vast majority of Americans, although according to the latest polls, his popularity and effectiveness ratings had dropped sharply by late February. Americans neither love him nor hate him, which is one measure of the absence of his impact on the country (Ford had the same problem, but he was not an elected president). As a matter of fact, *The Wall Street Journal* discovered that many of those who chose Carter over Ford in 1976 would do so today, his lackluster performance notwithstanding. People still say that his instincts are

right—but obviously this is not enough.

In fundamentals, we know almost as little about our President as we did when we elected him. To be sure, Carter is highly visible: Between his inauguration and March 9 of this year, he held 27 televised news conferences, an unusually high rate of media exposure. Then there were fireside chats on energy and on the Panama Canal treaties, a long year-end interview with the TV networks, meetings with magazine editors, college editors, and broadcasters. There have been well-covered trips around the country and overnight visits with an "average American family" in this or that town.

Some critics argue that Carter operates through symbolism (not even style) rather than through substance. Americans remember his walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, from Capitol Hill to the White House on Inauguration Day, and that he wore a cardigan while delivering the fireside energy chat. But few remember what he actually said in his inaugural or in the energy talk. There have been virtually no memorable thoughts, no memorable lines that future generations might quote.

The image we have of Jimmy Carter is of the unfailing politeness, the tight-lipped smile (the blue eyes rarely smile, they remain hard and cold), the soft voice, the permanent self-control. (During the campaign, the Carter smile was toothy, not tight-lipped; it was his personality symbol and an asset. It no longer seems to be.) There is no human projection in the sense of Truman, Kennedy, Johnson, or even Nixon (who at least could be angry, nasty, petulant, self-serving, or cloying). What comes across, over television or in personal contact, is the aloofness and sometimes a touch of self-righteousness. A woman who often visits the White House remarked not long ago, "You know, it's a bit eerie. Carter says all the right things, goes through all the motions, seems at ease with the pomp and the pageantry of the presidency, but, damn it, you just don't have the feeling that this man is the President of the United States. That special extra dimension is somehow missing."

Much of this image may stem from the fact that Jimmy Carter is a very private person who chooses not to be excessively communicative outside the small circle of his Georgia helpers and friends—Hamilton Jordan, who is the de facto White House chief of staff; Press Secretary Jody Powell; Bert Lance, no longer head of the Office of Management and Budget but still close to the President; and Atlanta attorney Charles Kirbo. In a way, the Georgia "mafia" are to Carter what Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and Ziegler were to Nixon: men with whom he feels at home. Kennedy, to be sure, had his Massachusetts "mafia," and Johnson had his Texans; but both reached out for human contact in all directions, by phone or personally.

Carter, like Nixon, prefers maximal privacy. He deals chiefly with his senior staff—National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski sees the President every morning and sometimes more often—but by and large he tends to shun outside visitors. Among the resentments against him on Capitol Hill is that he does not meet with the congressional leadership often enough (though lately he has made an effort to improve this state of affairs). As a result, his policies are often unclear to senators and congressmen. Vice-President Mondale has easy access to the Oval Office, and he is highly involved in Carter's domestic and international initia-

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tives. It is a constructive relationship, but no visible personal closeness has developed between the two men. Whenever possible, Carter's approach is to read staff memoranda rather than to be briefed orally. This, of course, is a question of the working style that suits him best, but the impression grows around the White House that the President is increasingly isolating himself.

Having run for the presidency as a Washington "outsider," Carter still remains that—by choice. The Carters occasionally attend the theater or concerts, but the President and his immediate entourage basically want no part of the city's "establishment." As if through deliberate arrogance, their playtime is with each other. A famous Georgetown hostess was shocked recently when upon inviting a ranking White House staffer to dinner, she was asked to provide a guest list in advance. This is not done in Washington—except in the case of the President's coming to dinner.

Carter started out by emphasizing the central role of the Cabinet, but this emphasis soon evaporated. With the exceptions of Defense Secretary Harold Brown, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and Central Intelligence Agency director Stansfield Turner, key advisers (except for White House staffers) do not enjoy permanent access to the Oval Office.

At the same time, the White House is acting with excessive defensiveness about Carter, his top staff, and his administration's policies in general. The Carter White House has certainly not reached the stage of the Nixon White House "bunker" mentality, but exchanges between Powell and newsmen are growing testy and unpleasant. Reporters have been called on the carpet by Powell in a manner that even Ziegler seldom employed in "correcting" news stories. Unexpectedly, Carter's "open administration" seems to be as distressingly thin-skinned as was the Republican regime's. Criticism is not gladly accepted, and something akin to an "it's them against us" atmosphere toward the press is emerging again at the White House. Most curiously, this nascent conflict involves the so-called liberal writers more than it does the conservatives: In a broader sense, the liberal establishment is more vocally critical of the Carter administration than that of the conservatives, presumably because their early high expectations for the new President have yet to be met. (It has almost been overlooked that the President did, in effect, grant an amnesty to Vietnam War draft evaders and together with the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence laid the groundwork for a sensible reorganization of the U.S. intelligence community.)

The end of the honeymoon between the White House and the liberals of the media came with the Bert Lance affair last fall, when Carter resisted pressures to dismiss his banker friend from the Budget post despite Lance's questionable past banking practices. The dismissal of David Marston, a Republican United States attorney in Philadelphia, became another cause célèbre in which the President was caught flat-footed; charges of cover-ups and of old-fashioned political patronage triggered more bitterness in the White House, and as late as the March 9 news conference, Carter was unable to explain why the Justice Department had deleted from Marston's file favorable comments made about the attorney by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. As Congressman Cohen remarked, "The promise to take politics out of the Department of Justice is the most visible incon-

sistency between words and deeds."

Most astounding of the media episodes, however, was Powell's issuance of a 33-page "white paper" defending the President's chief political adviser, Hamilton Jordan, from accusations in Washington gossip columns that he had spit a mouthful of amaretto and cream at a young woman who allegedly was resisting his advances at a local singles bar. Jordan had been involved earlier in tactless public behavior (including a remark comparing the *poitrine* of the Egyptian ambassador's wife to the pyramids on the Nile), but through Powell's overkill press release, the bar incident was escalated to the level of a national front-page story. Jordan, whose responsibilities have been enlarged to give him a major voice in high-level foreign policy decisions, has become the butt of contemptuous jokes by comedians and TV talk-show hosts in a way that casts an embarrassing pall on a White House that prides itself on seriousness and rectitude. The promotion of "Billy Beer" by the President's brother, Billy Carter, a commercial exploitation of his White House family links, has added little to presidential prestige. This goes, too, for the strange "religious" involvement of the President's sister, Ruth Carter Stapleton, with the hard-porn publisher Larry Flynt (she rushed to his bedside after he was shot) and for the promotion by "Miz Lillian" Carter of her book.

The mystery is that Carter seems unaware of the damage that he suffers from Jordan's and brother Billy's shenanigans. He is, of course, most loyal to friends and relatives, but for a man so conscious of symbolism, he should realize that his White House is seen by the public in terms of these negative symbols. It is bad news when "Ham" Jordan's notoriety distracts Americans from the more weighty issues of the presidency, particularly since Jordan happens to be an extremely intelligent and useful member of the presidential staff.

**F**ROM THE OUTSET, THEN, Carter has misread the mood of the nation. Americans may not wish to live through another imperial presidency, but, like any nation, they do want their leaders to be leaders—to be admirable, to set goals, and indeed to define the country's "vision." Without such leadership, neither the Congress nor the people will be responsive to his initiatives.

Carter has shown his lack of leadership by his lack of preparedness on three issues. He has said that government "must move away from crisis management," but this wish also collided with reality—as the President quickly discovered—when the lengthy coal strike created a national emergency and forced him to invoke the unpopular Taft-Hartley Act. Carter had no such plan when the coal strike erupted last December, but making a virtue of necessity, he later insisted that out of respect for the collective bargaining process, he had stayed out of it until the negotiations broke down late in February.

Carter was also unprepared for President Anwar Sadat's peace initiative in the Middle East—largely the result of the administration's earlier mismanagement of Arab-Israeli diplomacy—and then proceeded to play catch-up ball, claiming credit for what looked at the time like a major breakthrough.

Playing arbiter, Carter got bogged down in a pointless public dispute with Israel's prime minister Menachem Begin over the meaning of United Nations resolutions on a Middle

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East peace. While portraying himself as the champion of peace, the President insisted on selling advanced jet aircraft to Saudi Arabia and Egypt as well as to Israel during the most delicate period in the negotiations earlier this year. This served to embroil the White House in an unpleasant controversy with the Jewish-American community, in which both sides succeeded in looking as bad as possible. When Israel occupied a strip of Lebanese territory to neutralize Palestinian terrorists who on March 11 killed scores of Israeli civilians, the Carter administration—which had been arguing for the return of Arab territories taken in 1967—proposed installing the U.N. peacekeeping buffer force in the area instead of the Israeli occupying forces.

The administration was also surprised by the magnitude of the Soviet-Cuban engagement in Ethiopia's war with Somalia, although there had been warning signals for nearly a year for anyone to see. In this context, Carter and Brzezinski displayed their frustrations in and their penchant for hard-line foreign policy. Against the advice of Vance, they announced that Soviet behavior in the Horn of Africa might affect the current negotiations for a new SALT agreement. Vance's view, generally shared by the foreign policy community in Washington, was that the Horn and SALT were not comparable issues in America's security priorities. With the quickening nuclear arms race, Vance feels that a SALT II agreement is vital to the United States.

Similarly, the administration ignored for six months the steady depreciation of the dollar despite dire warnings from all quarters. Such spokesmen as Treasury Secretary W. Michael Blumenthal publicly discounted serious dangers to the dollar, leading speculators worldwide to believe that the United States would not intervene on the markets to protect the value of its currency. Only in January, when the situation had gotten out of hand, did the administration attempt to bolster the dollar, but even those efforts were halfhearted, with the result that by March the greenback had plunged to an all-time low. Carter's reaction to *that* was to recite homilies about economic "principles," which, he said, the world was not assessing properly—and the dollar kept sliding. The policy decision was to push West Germany and Japan to stimulate *their* economies so that they could buy more from the United States and thereby strengthen the dollar. All this only served to damage relations with Bonn and Tokyo.

Disturbing to the country at large is its continued inability to understand or to define domestically and internationally Carter's philosophy. This relates directly to the Congress's and the public's lack of confidence in the man from Georgia.

He *sounds* liberal (or populist) when, for example, he denounces the oil companies' excessive profits or when he engages in platitudinous rhetoric about the plight of our cities or of human rights abroad. But he *acts* like a conservative in terms of the budget and other economic policies. In the end, neither liberals nor conservatives trust him.

Proposing a \$25-billion tax cut in the next fiscal year (beginning in October, just before the midterm elections), the President left both the poor and the rich dissatisfied. The poor concluded that the cut would not compensate for inflation and for steeply increased social security taxes (one of the few major pieces of legislation Carter managed to get through the Congress in 1977; but even House speaker Tip O'Neill wants to revise the law downward in 1978). The

rich—notably, corporate managers—felt the proposed tax cut was inadequate to stimulate the economy. They were already worried about the sharp drop in automotive sales since this past December.

Rather pointlessly, the President urged the Congress to ban tax deductions for businessmen's "three-martini lunches" (the populist aspect of the Carter approach). The added revenue would be minimal in terms of the budget, but by pressing for it Carter succeeded in antagonizing the businessmen, as well as the labor unions in the restaurant trades, on whose goodwill his administration has to depend.

Then, too, it was unbecoming for a supposedly liberal administration to suggest that food stamps be taken away from coal miners if they did not go back to work under the Taft-Hartley Act provisions. This threat was made the same week the United Auto Workers decided to contribute \$2 million to the depleted coffers of the miners' union. Concurrently, the farmers' union, mad at the administration because of low agricultural prices, moved to donate food to the striking miners (these low farm prices had, of course, no bearing on what the consumer was paying for food: In February, the wholesale-food price index rose a record 2.9 percent over January's, bringing on even higher retail prices).

There are other notable instances of Carter's inconsistency. Having proclaimed in April 1977 that a national effort to conserve energy is the "moral equivalent of war" (one of the few Carter phrases that *are* remembered—though he borrowed it from William James), he then failed to follow this sentiment up in Congress, as, say, a Lyndon Johnson would have done. Because the House of Representatives passed most of the energy bill, the President assumed that the Senate would do likewise. When the bill was gutted in Senate committees and then on the floor, Carter's behavior turned erratic. While urging the bill's approval, he simultaneously undermined his followers, who had staged a Senate filibuster on the administration's behalf.

To win votes for the Panama treaties, Carter ended his opposition to the \$2.3-billion emergency farm bill: This was meant to placate Georgia's Senator Herman E. Talmadge, who then came out in favor of the treaties. Carter also suddenly announced support for the stockpiling of copper by the government (he at first opposed it) to please Arizona's Senator Dennis DeConcini, who held another key vote. Small wonder that more and more people on Capitol Hill snicker that Carter's programs are the "moral equivalent of nothing."

Carter's human rights campaign, a most commendable innovation in U.S. foreign policy, also has bogged down in contradictions and inconsistencies. Well over a year after it was launched, with fanfare, it remains unclear where, to whom, and to what extent the new outlook applies. When the President discovered that his humanitarian concern clashed with American security requirements, a double standard emerged: Violations in some countries were punished with denial of military aid; elsewhere the policy was discreetly set aside.

And there were more inconsistencies at home. In the spring of 1977, the administration was ready to announce an "amnesty" for millions of foreigners residing illegally in the United States, mainly Mexicans. Then the White House became aware of the enormous legal complications of such a



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step, and the whole idea was quietly dropped. When coal miners prepared to vote on a new contract early in March 1978, senior administration officials warned Congress that power plants were so short of coal that millions in industry would be unemployed by April. On March 9, the day the back-to-work Taft-Hartley injunction was granted by a federal court, Carter announced that if only some miners returned to work, there would be no crisis because the supplies on hand were greater than anticipated. What is one to believe?

**T**HIS, OF COURSE, is the attitude taken by Congress—that Jimmy Carter is not believable. When he delivered the State of the Union Message this past January, there were catcalls in the congressional audience, something that nobody remembers ever happening before (TV network microphones did not pick up the noises of disrespect, but congressmen heard them clearly).

The Congress is obviously responsible for not producing energy legislation—too many vested interests collided when the Senate took up the legislation—and Carter is right when he says that there must be a "partnership" between the two branches of government. But most people in Congress agree privately that a more forceful and credible President would have obtained a law months ago.

When Carter finally announced his intention to use all legal means to deal with the coal strike, the Congress gave him virtual carte blanche to proceed. His well-orchestrated campaign on behalf of the Panama Canal treaties produced Senate ratification despite strong conservative opposition. But it remains a mystery why the President did not apply the same strategy in the battle over the energy bill.

Panama may be Carter's only major legislative victory—and foreign policy achievement—in 1978. With the delays on the energy bill, most other major legislation is expected to remain dormant during this election year. This goes for the tax bill, the welfare reform bill, the national health bill, and probably the full-employment bill. The President's ideas for reorganizing the Civil Service—including the debatable notion of paying bonuses for high performance on the job—are unlikely to be transformed into law.

If recent congressional attitudes are indications of things to come (a bill setting up a federally subsidized consumer protection agency dear to the President's heart was defeated in the House of Representatives when 101 Democrats, incredibly, deserted the leadership), the President will wind up with an exceedingly poor legislative record for his first two years in office.

He will then face his first fundamental test as President in the November elections. If inflation continues to mount and if the lack of confidence in Carter persists, as is likely, the Democratic majority in Congress may be seriously whittled down. Even now there are many senators and representatives who will tell you—very much off the record—that they are not sure they want Carter to campaign on their behalf. Few, if any, of the representatives elected in 1976 came in on Carter's coattails, and in 1978 the President may be a liability to many of them. Recent polls suggest that Carter may be losing much of his southern constituency, and the Republicans are busily courting disenchanted black leaders and

voters. It's difficult to predict what will happen in other constituencies, but the President's following among workers, farmers, and the middle class in general is dwindling. The voters are worried and confused; there is talk of an approaching new recession.

Nineteen-eighty is too far away to conjecture about the possibility that Carter will be a one-term President, but the fact that liberal commentators were asking this question even before he completed his first year in office is symptomatic of the possibility. This doesn't normally happen in the honeymoon year. And there is nothing visibly rosy in prospect for the balance of Carter's first term.

Looking at Carter's track record—and deploring the absence of leadership in the White House—we must, of course, ask, What does Carter's rise to power tell us about ourselves and the workings of our political system?

In retrospect, we must conclude that so keen were we in 1976 to draw the curtain across the Nixon-Ford era that we opted for a candidate whose principal asset was that he was new and appeared to be different from his immediate predecessors.

Seldom before 1976 had the nation voted for a politician about whom so little was known. Hindsight, to be sure, is easy. But the truth is that in Jimmy Carter—through the Democratic party's nomination and then the November election—we bought an enigma, and we bought it, really, sight unseen.

Under television's relentless pressure—and through reading the accounts of commentators then enamored of Carter—we believed the string of promises strewn about by the smiling candidate, from his first campaign caucuses in Iowa to his last post-election speech. We loved the idea that Carter's would be an "open administration" and that honesty, sincerity, and effective hard work would be the presidency's new hallmark.

So not enough tough questions were asked, little perspective was sought as to whether Carter could deliver on his promises, no assurance seemed necessary that he would get along with Congress and with everybody else. We were impatient, and we were naïve.

Now that Carter has been in office for 15 months, we are again impatient—this time because the new President has been unable or politically unwilling to keep his promises, because most of his goals remain unattained, and because those of us who voted for the Georgian are just plain losing faith. Inexorably, this impatience and disenchantment deepens the gulf between Carter and his constituencies, renders even more difficult the fulfillment of his objectives, and leads to a pervasive paralysis of the national will to move ahead.

"In terms of aroused expectations, we have clearly failed to meet our promises and hopes," a senior administration official once personally close to Carter remarked sadly the other day. "We don't seem to know where we are going. We improvise. God willing, we shall muddle through." Carter, evidently, promised us too much. We were too quick to believe that he could indeed transform all these words and plans into deeds. The indictment, then, is as much of ourselves as of Carter. ●

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# A Consumer's Guide to Pseudoscience

by James S. Trefil

I HAVE MIXED FEELINGS about the current boom in things parascientific—movies like *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, TV shows about weekly UFO landings, and books about spaceships that descended to earth in prehistoric times. As a physicist, I realize that today's flights of fancy may well be tomorrow's scientific orthodoxy. But it worries me that a public ill equipped to distinguish between razzle-dazzle and sound speculation is swallowing whole many pseudoscientific notions that strike me as silly at best and as a species of intellectual junk food at worst.

My concern here is not, incidentally, altogether cool and disinterested; I still brood about the time several years ago when my son, then ten, was watching a TV "documentary" about ancient civilizations that had been visited by extraterrestrials. When I ventured something mildly skeptical about the show, my son turned on me and cried, "But didn't you see? They *proved* it!"

Repeated experiences like this with my children, my students, and my contemporaries have left me convinced that the world could use a kind of do-it-yourself guide to getting one's bearings in the Alice-in-Wonderland realm of unorthodox scientific claims. Before launching into this guide, however, I'd like to make some general remarks about offbeat claims and mention some concrete examples.

As I said above, it's important to realize that unorthodox views are not alien to conventional science. When you come down to it, every accepted scientific principle started out in life as an unorthodox thought in the mind of one man. It follows, then, that in every living science there is a frontier area where new basic principles are being sought and where innovative ideas can gain a hearing. In my own field of physics there are several frontier areas, the most wide-open one being the study of elementary particles (the subatomic objects that in some way contain the key to the ultimate structure of matter). So newness in itself is not now and never has been a basis for the rejection of an idea by the scientific community.

One can visualize the situation in science in terms of concentric circles: At the *center* is that body of time-tested, universally accepted ideas that are set forth in school and college texts. The first circle out from the center is the *frontier*, which interacts constantly with the center, feeding it new ideas that the center, after lengthy testing, adopts and assimilates.

If we move beyond the frontier region of a science, however, we come to a hazy outer circle area that I like to call the *fringe*. The fringe is characterized by a scarcity of hard data and by a general fuzziness of ideas that make the average scientist very uncomfortable. It is a zone in which neither accepted scientific writ nor reasonable extrapolations of scientific knowledge seem to apply. For these reasons, it is

an area that scientists generally prefer to avoid.

Yet the fringe has its uses, for it feeds ideas to the frontier, much as the frontier feeds ideas to the center: Fifty years ago, the notion that we should attempt to communicate with extraterrestrial intelligences would most emphatically have been a fringe concept. Yet today this idea has moved into the more respectable frontier circle. (Incidentally, this move illustrates an important point about the ideas contained within both the fringe and the frontier: The soundest, most useful of them keep gravitating inward, ring by ring, toward the orthodox center.)

Now there is only one thing that will make the average scientist more uneasy than talking about what lies beyond his particular frontier and that is having someone express doubts about the validity of ideas that he considers to be established at the center of his discipline and therefore no longer open to question. For example, in the time of Isaac Newton the law of gravity was a frontier subject, but now it is regarded as a principle that has been validated by centuries of experiment and use. This law has passed from the frontier of science and is firmly ensconced within the vital center. Anyone who suggests that the law ought to be abandoned or modified is not going to get a sympathetic hearing unless he presents a very convincing argument.

The progression of scientific ideas from frontier circle to "center" acceptance isn't always smooth. The germ theory of disease and the theory of continental drift are examples of ideas that were considered too "fringy" when they were first introduced. Only long, often acrimonious campaigns won them official recognition.

There have of course been thousands of fringe ideas that never made it to the frontier and thousands of frontier ideas that never gained centrist respectability. The basic problems, then, that anyone, scientist or layman, faces when confronted with a new theory are how to decide where it belongs on the concentric-circle scale and how to determine its chances of eventual acceptance.

In making such judgments, scientists have to keep two criteria in mind: A new idea may be rejected because it is too far beyond the frontier—for instance, too fringy and unprovable; or it may be rejected because it is too far behind the frontier—for instance, a clumsy, complicated way of accomplishing ends already being accomplished by simple, efficient, economical centrist theories. Thus, an overly elaborate, hard-to-prove, Rube Goldberg-like notion could be rejected because it might be at once too fringy and too inefficient in comparison with well-established centrist theories.

With this framework in mind, let's look at some current offbeat theories and the problems they pose for the citizen who is wondering whether to accept or reject their striking claims.

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