

THE BACK DOOR

With All Due Disrespect

THE BOY FELT no sensation whatever before Presidents. A President was a matter of course in every respectable family; he had two of his own. Revolutionary patriots, or perhaps a Colonial Governor, might be worth talking about, but anyone could be President, and some very shady characters were likely to be....

"Every one thought alike whether they had ancestors or not. No sort of glory hedged Presidents as such, and, in the whole country, one could hardly have met with an admission of respect for any office or name, unless it were George Washington."

The boy, thus remembered by himself, was Henry Adams, great-grandson and grandson to presidents. The president to whom he had just been introduced was Zachary Taylor, in 1850.

In 1978, our pantheon of "respectable" presidents is somewhat enlarged to include Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and depending on one's vantage, Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt, and Kennedy. But a sense of disenchantment reigns strongly. Anybody, it seems, can be president, and some very shady characters are likely to be.

President Carter is only partly responsible for this disenchantment. Each year since the day we buried JFK, the office and its occupants have lost more sheen while accumulating layers of tarnish. Lyndon Johnson's stomach scar and un stomachable war; Nixon's foul mouth and petty criminality; Ford's stumble-bumming and his alcoholic First Lady—all sooted the dream

of glory. Sadly, the two potentially glittering candidates for the job—Robert and Ted Kennedy—were stopped en route by deaths.

And now we must deal with the preachy, "government-as-good-as-its-people" Carter, together with his clan of finagling bankers and dope-dealing and booze-spitting aides, not to mention his publicity-hungry siblings, who exploit big brother to sell their brands of beer and Jesus. Were it not for our disappointment with Carter's immediate predecessors and the repetitive piety of his campaign, our reaction to the President's troubles might not be so nasty and absolute. And were it not for the obsessive and constant devotion of the press to this topic, the feeling of contempt for the President might not have been stoked to such a white heat. But to blame the press or Congress or the past, as Carter's dwindling group of apologists tends to, is to evade responsibility. Respect in a free society is earned, not owed. Carter has lost the respect of his public because he has failed to earn it. Whatever his excuses, Carter, by performing poorly, has made us all feel poorly about our system of government and/or our own judgment.

It is a peculiarity of the American presidency that garnering the respect of the constituents is more important than enacting any piece of legislation or appointing any individual. In most other elective offices in this country—and in most other free countries—getting the prescribed job done is as much as one can ask of a public official. But

the American president, in our odd set-up, must function as both the operative and the symbolic chief of state. We lack a queen or titular president who uncontroversially presides while a Prime Minister functions. Our president must not only govern; he must represent us to ourselves and to the world as we would like to be perceived. To a disquieting extent, he embodies America. His strengths and failings are our strengths and failings.

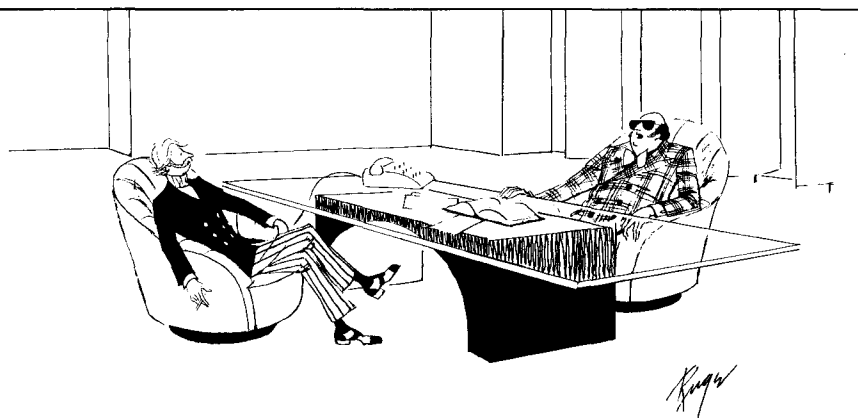
Respect enhances a president's power and ability to accomplish tasks. By dint of his personality, President Kennedy persuaded Americans to forego their insularity and join the Peace Corps. The fact that this spirit of involvement in other nations' affairs led to a military involvement in Vietnam should not lead us to denigrate the effort. The Peace Corps and its domestic stepchild, VISTA, represented a sort of noble idealism rarely witnessed since.

If President Carter had ignited some of that latent idealism, America might have had a comprehensive energy program by now. But instead of leading, Carter simply explained, trusting the force of his arguments to waft his plan to its destination like a magic carpet. But, as any able demagogue knows, one cannot simply declare "the moral equivalent of war"; one must excite the fervor. True, Carter's energy plan was mauled in Congress by special interests. But had Carter managed to persuade the constituents of congressmen and senators that America *needed*, and that they, the constituents, *wanted* such legislation, it would never have encountered such obstacles.

Disrespect for a president creates disrespect for all politicians and for the system. It is a sign of our dispiritedness that the country's next most publicized politician is a California governor who emphasizes government's inability to solve problems.

The controversies surrounding Bert Lance and Hamilton Jordan and Billy Carter and Peter Bourne, while not individually important, have in the aggregate increased our contempt for the President and for ourselves. However intelligent his initiatives, Carter has thus far failed as a leader. And lack of leadership is what makes boys feel "no sensation whatever before Presidents."

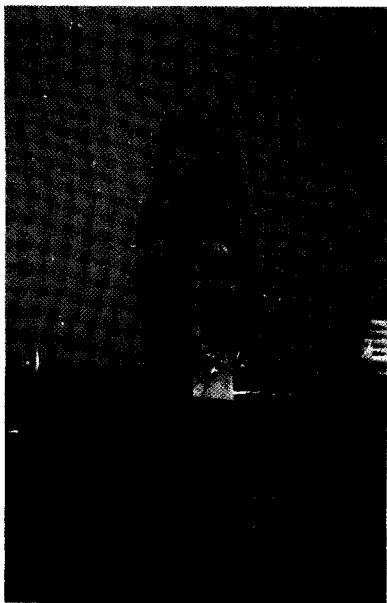
—CARLL TUCKER



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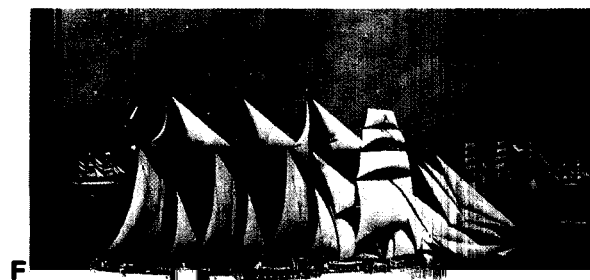
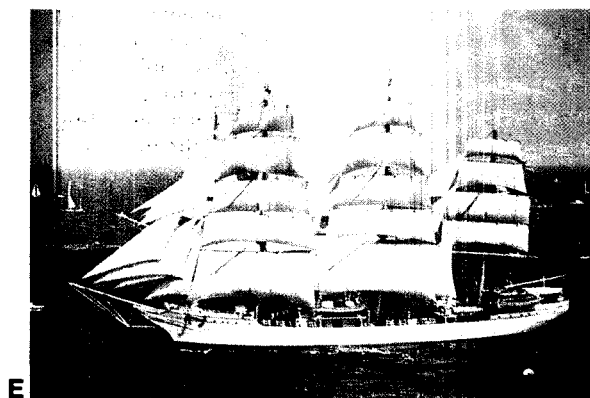
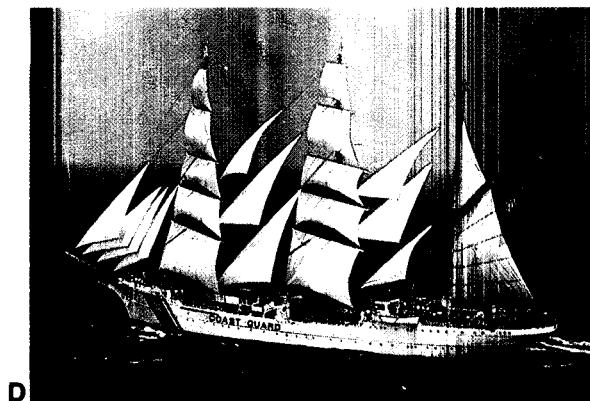
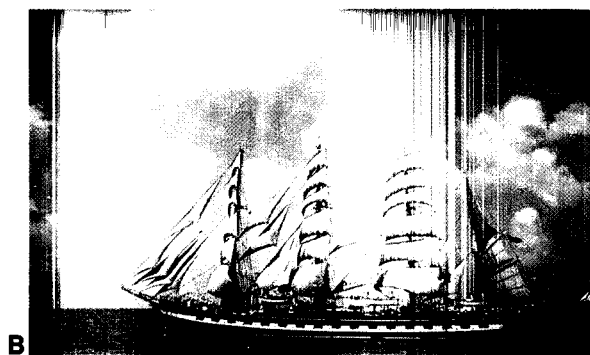
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