

Jimmy Carter's Distinctly Average Foreign Policy Record

Written by Jonathan Provan

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JONATHAN PROVAN, APR 14 2012

It is time to revisit the foreign policy record of Jimmy Carter, and consider it in the context of both the Cold War and the issue of America's role in the world. This is a worthwhile task, given the parallels between Carter's single term in office and where we find ourselves today: the US, with a democrat in the White House, is nearing the end of a period of increasingly unpopular conflict abroad, faces economic uncertainty, and the American decline debate has reared its head yet again in the face of emerging powers. For the Barack Obama administration, a better understanding of Carter's foreign policy record has obvious benefits. Walter Russell Mead has already warned Obama of the dangers of suffering from 'the Carter syndrome'.^[1] However, the American electorate will do well to similarly take note, as both Carter's successes and failures in foreign policy can allow them to consider their current president's performance when it comes to casting their votes at the upcoming presidential election. As such, Carter retains his relevance, 31 years after leaving office.

The debate at present is framed by an orthodox/revisionist divide: in the years immediately following his defeat to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election, an orthodox school was established, which criticised Carter for constructing a confused, ill-conceived foreign policy, pursued by an administration that was unprepared and incapable of filling the office of the executive. This is perhaps best represented by Donald Spencer, who dismissed the Carter presidency as a 'four year experiment in amateurism'.^[2] More recently, this position has been challenged by revisionist scholars, most notably John Dumbrell, who have taken a more positive view, suggesting the Carter's response to the position in which he found himself upon taking office in 1977 was both insightful and far sighted. For Dumbrell, the shortcomings in Carter's foreign policy were attributable more to practical shortcomings than deficiencies with the president's personality or the strategy itself. More to the point, these shortcomings should be seen in context. ^[3]

The truth, as is so often the case, is both more complex and more prosaic, but also more interesting. This paper will argue that Carter's foreign policy was flawed from the outset, as it sought to pursue a series of irreconcilable objectives, through contradictory and inconsistent means, exacerbated by divisions within the administration, and Carter's personal shortcomings in the field of presidential leadership and organisation. However, it will be conceded that Carter's foreign policy was not an 'experiment in amateurism', and nor was it a total failure, as his record illustrates several important foreign accomplishments. Also, and importantly, his administration bequeathed to his successor a nation that was capable and willing to bring the Cold War to its conclusion. In 1977 this would have seemed an impossible task. Consequently, Carter's foreign policy can be considered, as Scott Kaufman suggests, as 'lacklustre,' or as distinctly average, demonstrative of a post-revisionist viewpoint, which will perhaps come to dominate scholarship concerning Carter in the future.^[4] Obama also inherited a nation without a clear sense of purpose in the world, as his predecessor George W. Bush's 'war on terror' and 'freedom agenda' became more muted and ultimately disappeared, allowing the absence of an integrative conceptual grand strategy that has characterised the post-Cold War years to return to prominence. If Obama can leave office with a nation that has started to overcome its present troubles, and has the signs of understanding its role in the world, then he will be judged a success by future historians. This is no small task, yet given the importance of US power and an America willing to play an active role in world politics for continued peace and stability, and tackling the numerous global issues that will shape the twenty-first century, it is one that the Obama administration will have to continue to address.

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The paper will initially contextualise the Carter presidency and outline its foreign policy objectives and strategies, before considering the reasons for their failures, using the illuminating example of the arms control versus human rights dichotomy faced vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. To offer a more balanced perspective, Carter's foreign policy successes will then be discussed, and suggestions concerning the causes of these accomplishments will be made, before conclusions are drawn, and some lessons for the Obama administration, and future governments, are put forward.

Before considering the individual failures and successes of Carter's foreign policy, it is worth contextualising the state of the US at this time and the analysing the foreign policy strategy Carter and his team developed. In 1976, when Carter was elected, America was in a state of introspective crisis. The scars of Watergate and Vietnam were still fresh, the economy was in recession and experiencing an energy crisis, and Communism appeared to be expanding globally. This situation led Carter himself to describe a 'crisis of spirit' in America, which was widely interpreted as describing a state of national 'malaise.'^[5] This situation both constrained and liberated the Carter administration; the memories of Vietnam limited its foreign policy options, particularly concerning military intervention, but there was also an opportunity to provide a break from the past and create a new foreign policy, based on American principles and morals. Consequently, Carter and his foreign policy advisors, in particular Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, embarked on a lofty and idealistic series of foreign policy goals. In particular, according to Vance, the new administration 'felt confident that for the first time in years, the United States was politically, psychologically and materially capable of offering leadership.'^[6] The administration set forth a wide ranging set of targets, centred on, in Vance's articulation: maintaining strength over the Soviet Union, but not allowing it to dominate the agenda; sensitivity and awareness to all global issues; commitment to human rights; retaining a sense of a long-term vision; and incorporating the public and Congress in foreign policy matters.^[7]

Essentially, as John Lewis Gaddis noted, Carter was consciously attempting to break away from the previous administration's foreign policy, which was dominated by Henry Kissinger and his commitment to *realpolitik* and détente, as well as breaking away from American foreign policy's preoccupation with containment of the Soviet Union. 'One senses,' Gaddis commented, 'an almost desperate effort to establish a distinctive identity, to escape from the lengthy and intimidating shadow of Henry Kissinger.'^[8] However, as one may ascertain from Vance's summary, Carter's foreign policy goals were numerous and wide-ranging, to the extent of becoming contradictory and inconsistent. Coupled with Carter's poor management and infighting in the administration, particularly between Vance and Brzezinski, the successful implementation of this strategy was unlikely at best, inconceivable at worst. Moreover, as Gaddis argues, whilst rhetorically Carter was departing from what had become foreign policy norms of containment, linkage and asymmetrical response, in practice they were continued, especially concerning relations with the USSR and the negotiations of a second Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II).^[9]

The difficulties encountered in implementing such a broad and idealistic strategy is perhaps best demonstrated by the administration's support of human rights, particularly concerning the Soviet Union, which conflicted with the SALT II negotiations. A commitment to human rights served numerous purposes: on a cognitive level, it appealed to the president's personal morality; in terms of domestic politics it satisfied both leftists who advocated a principled foreign policy and the emerging neoconservative movement who favoured a more proactive stance against the Soviet Union; and internationally it served to strengthen America's global standing.^[10] As Joshua Muravchik neatly summarised, 'the issue had resonance, both in Carter's soul and in the polls.'^[11] In practice, however, the limitations of a moralistic foreign policy became evident, as did the contradictions and inconsistencies within Carter's foreign policy strategy. American criticism of the USSR's human rights record, particularly concerning dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov, led to Soviet intransigence in the SALT II negotiations; Carter was attempting to progress from linkage, but he failed to recognise it could work both ways. Indeed, the Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev retorted to the criticisms, 'we will not tolerate interference in our internal affairs by anyone and under any pretext. A normal development of relations on such a basis is, of course, unthinkable.'^[12] Vance's scheduled trip to Moscow to discuss the SALT II treaty as a result ended in failure, and in the face of such obduracy, Carter was forced to relax his position considerably, shifting from 'absolutism to pragmatism' in the course of just eighteen months.^[13] In this instance, Carter was unable to appreciate the interconnected nature of such delicate issues as negotiating an arms control treaty with the Soviet Union, and felt that policies could be delinked.

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Regarding Carter's human rights policy more generally, it is also possible to highlight further deficiencies. Firstly, the policy was all but abandoned by the end of the administration, as Cold War realities and strategies of containment returned to prominence, arguably a triumph of power over principles. Secondly, human rights policies when they were applied were done so in an inconsistent manner, as some states with questionable humanitarian records were given a free reign, with some even receiving US support and aid, in the cases of Romania, South Korea and Zaire. As well as this inconsistency, the Carter administration failed to reconcile the inherent tension between humanitarian interventionism and a desire to allow states their rights to self-determination, demonstrated most explicitly in Iran and Nicaragua, where American interests were ultimately damaged by Carter's inaction, a charge levied by Jeane Kirkpatrick.[14] More procedurally, and symptomatic of Carter's larger shortcomings in presidential organisation, human rights policies were not centrally co-ordinated, and were largely executed on an individual, *ad hoc* basis.[15] As a consequence, turf wars broke out and human rights initiatives were resisted at Department of State, the Pentagon, the Treasury and the National Security Council. The result, as Dumbrell notes, was 'bureaucratic inertia.'[16]

With these arguments accepted, however, Carter's human rights initiative was not a complete failure. Firstly, despite claims in Carter's inaugural address to the contrary, his administration did not pursue an 'absolute' human rights policy. Indeed, a more pragmatic approach was pursued, where America's geopolitical and security concerns were considered before action was determined.[17] Whilst this led to criticisms concerning inconsistency and hypocrisy as noted above, such a position is arguably consistent with more long-term American foreign policy traditions and strategies. Further, the policy had both tangible and abstract benefits. Importantly, the issue of human rights in foreign policy was institutionalised within the executive decision-making process. Whilst the various positions Carter created throughout the executive branch may have initially failed to make much impact, they did provide the issue with a 'hitherto unknown bureaucratic legitimacy,' useful for future administrations.[18] On a more philosophical level, the dynamic of American foreign policy started to turn its attention to placing a high value on the importance of morals and principles. In this sense, the Kissinger years of amoral *realpolitik* were eventually abandoned, and distinctions between 'good' and 'bad' government, and America's sense of responsibility, resulted because of Carter's moralistic emphasis, and were pursued by Reagan. Indeed, some scholars have praised Carter's achievement of 'shifting the discourse on American foreign policy away from the dominant concerns of the Cold War and containment.'[19]

Overall, the case of Jimmy Carter's human rights policy represents a useful microcosm for analysing the success of his foreign policy more generally. Conceived with lofty ideals, the policy was arguably doomed from the start. Such a range of problems would have been too great for any administration to solve, which the Carter administration probably realised early into its tenure in office. This situation was only exacerbated when the inherent inconsistencies and contradictions between pursuing such a policy and the realities of international politics became evident; when combined with Carter's poor organisation of his office and the internal divisions that developed, a 'lacklustre' foreign policy was perhaps the best possible outcome.

A trained engineer, Carter was undoubtedly a keen micromanager, who desired to be involved at all levels of the decision-making process, and to be aware of all the details of every issue; he had an 'inability to delegate.'[20] Further, Carter developed a style of management that was premised on all his top advisers having equal access to him, which in theory would give the president a broad picture of the issues, where all views could be aired and considered. Kaufman labelled such an approach a 'spokes-in-the-wheel' system.[21] The system was, according to Dumbrell, 'designed to enhance and reconcile presidential control, openness, coherence, multiple advocacy, and long-term planning.'[22] Again, Carter was attempting to depart from his predecessors, where foreign policy had largely been the exclusive domain of Kissinger, as the auteur of American strategy. The shortfall of this system was that it was dependent on each adviser having equal access to the president, and the policies that were decided being clearly enunciated in order to ensure their effective execution. Moreover, a level of unity was required in order to allow consistent and coherent policies to be created and implemented.

In Carter's administration this was not the case. Indeed, in assessing the success of post-war presidents, Fred Greenstein summarised, 'the organisation of the Carter presidency was at its worst in foreign affairs.'[23] The reasons are numerous, but can be briefly noted: Firstly, Vance and Brzezinski ran a running battle for influence, with

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Vance taking the view that Brzezinski assigned himself the role of foreign policy spokesman, froze the State Department out of important decisions and frequently contradicted the policies that were announced. Vance noted, 'Brzezinski's practice became a serious impediment to the conduct of our foreign policy.'^[24] Confounded by a genuine personality clash between the two and Carter's inability to resolve the situation, the result was uncreative tension, internal dissensus, and inertia. This manifested itself in an increasingly confused foreign policy, perhaps best demonstrated by Carter's speech of 7 June 1978 where his discussion of US-Soviet policy was 'so disjunctive in its combined reaffirmation of détente and articulation of a confrontational strategy that the general reaction was perplexity.'^[25] More practically, policies were made in an *ad hoc* manner by agency heads, with no sense of overarching strategy, a charge that must be levied at the president.^[26]

Indeed, it was perhaps this doctrinal shortcoming that most came to define the failures of the Carter presidency. Kaufman commented that had Carter developed a more unified message for his foreign policy, perhaps adopting a more Wilsonian perspective, consistent with American values and interests, he may have had more success.^[27] However, his 'compartmentalised' approach to the presidency, treating every issue as singular and delinked from others, combined with an organisation that was in internal disarray, led to a confused foreign policy. This is demonstrated by the details of the 'Carter doctrine,' a specific strategy related to one region of the globe in the Persian Gulf.^[28] Compared with the all-encompassing nature of the Monroe or Truman doctrines, it becomes evident that Carter was a president incapable of seeing the big picture, a suggestion further demonstrated by his inability to provide the nation with a grand sense of mission or direction concerning his foreign policy, in great contrast to his successor, Ronald Reagan.

For all these shortcomings however, it would be unfair to label Carter's foreign policy a failure. To do so would be to deny the administration several notable foreign policy successes: Most notably, the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, the Panama Canal treaties and the normalisation of relations with China. Each of these had ramifications far beyond Carter's presidency, and each, perhaps with the exception of China, demonstrated a desire on the part of the president to undertake challenges for which there was little domestic pressure, and a great deal of risk. Consider for example, the Israel-Egypt peace treaty; in this case, Carter's keen micromanagement style arguably played a significant role in allowing discussions between the Middle Eastern leaders to continue, even salvaging the talks at one stage when a breakdown appeared imminent.^[29] Whilst the treaty itself had little tangible benefit for Middle Eastern peace, its resonance, as with the Panama Canal treaties, was arguably more symbolic, returning America to position of moral standing, after the ambiguous amorality of the Kissinger years. Again, this can be deemed to have served as a foundation for Reagan's later notable invocation of moral clarity in describing and rationalising his foreign policy. Also, it is worth noting that towards the end of his administration, Carter initiated a progressive increase in defence spending, which his successor would build upon in taking a more assertive and proactive stance against the Soviet Union and, ultimately, contributing to the end of the Cold War.

Further, when considering Carter's foreign policy failures, one should note the issue of chance, and the context. In the example of Iran, Carter has been much criticised for his inaction while the shah was overthrown and the Iranian government fell to Islamic extremists. However, as Carter himself noted, the Iranian revolution could not have been predicted,^[30] and his response to the Iranian hostage crisis might have succeeded, were it not for the uncontrollable variables that affected the rescue attempt.^[31] Indeed, it could even be suggested that a successful resolution to the situation in Tehran may have given Carter a second term in office, in which his foreign policy objectives could have been achieved. Put simply, Carter suffered a great deal of bad luck whilst in office, of which the events in Iran are the most prominent example. Moreover, one must remind themselves of the context of Carter's presidency; America's 'malaise', combined with economic problems and the spectres of Watergate and Vietnam still looming large, meant the president was greatly constrained in his ability to act. Ultimately, it would be unfair to label Carter's foreign policy a failure, as when a comparison is made between the start and end of his time in office, the state of the US and its international standing had not significantly deteriorated; whilst he had not solved the nation's foreign policy issues, nor did he necessarily exacerbate them. Therefore, Carter's main failings were in attaining the lofty goals he and his senior officials set for themselves upon taking office, due to both the flawed nature of those goals, and the strategies employed to achieve them.

In conclusion, the foreign policy of Jimmy Carter was not a failure, but nor can it be considered a success. The

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objectives stated and strategies employed were both unrealistic and contradictory; a unified executive with a sound decision-making process and effective system of executing policy would have found it difficult to reconcile such a problematic and confused mixture of goals. That Carter's administration was divided, characterised by persistent infighting and unable to pursue policy in a consistent and coherent manner made this task impossible. Ultimately, this accusation must land at the door of the president. Carter created an administration that reflected his personal management style, whereby he aimed to be involved at all levels of the process, and sought to give all presidential advisors equal influence in decision-making. This system, exacerbated by personality clashes, led to dissensus and uncreative tension within the administration; crucially, Carter did little to resolve the situation, and the implementation of foreign policy suffered as a result. However, this is not to say Carter's presidency represents an abject failure; indeed, as noted above, his record is punctuated with a number of notable personal successes, and towards the end of his term in office, Carter initiated a defence spending build-up that enabled his successor in the White House to construct a foreign policy that exerted pressure upon the Soviet Union and, arguably, contributed to the resolution of the Cold War. But overall, Carter's foreign policy was distinctly mediocre, and can be considered as an example of how foreign policy should not be decided and implemented.

So what are the lessons for the Obama administration from Carter's experience? They can be listed thus:

- The public need to know what your plan is

Democrats in particular of late seem to have struggled on this point. Carter, and then Bill Clinton found it hard to present a vision for their foreign policy; Obama has faced similar criticisms. This is partly due to the circumstances when they found themselves in office; Carter faced the obstacle of Vietnam's legacy, whilst Clinton and his team searched, ultimately unsuccessfully, for a replacement to the Cold War strategy of containment. Obama is constrained by both financial meltdown and the chastening experiences of Afghanistan and Iraq. Nevertheless, a sense of an overarching goal in foreign policy provides your administration with a sense of direction in both perception and reality, and provides the nation with an integrative conceptual coherence. Moreover, the plan, even if it is fairly vague, needs to be coherent and preferably straightforward – if it can be presented as a 'doctrine', all the better. Think the Monroe Doctrine (no European colonisation of the Americas), the Truman Doctrine (containment), and – like it or loathe it – the Bush Doctrine (which didn't last long, but everyone knew what it was).

Put simply, if you've got a plan that everyone understands, then everyone knows what to do. Carter suffered from a contradictory and confused set of foreign policy principles, which had the effect of alienating the public and preventing the administration from 'hitting the ground running'. The result was an unfocused and messy foreign policy. As we near the end of his first term, Obama is yet to articulate such a doctrine, even though some commentators are trying to look for one.[32] His responses to various international challenges, such as a rising China, the Arab Spring and nuclear proliferation suggest a pragmatic, problem-solving approach; one which does not lend itself particularly well to grand statements of sweeping strategy. So far, his relatively successful record abroad has prevented this from becoming a problem, especially combined with a far greater focus amongst the public on domestic issues. However, international conditions change rapidly, and an idea of where you are taking the nation in the murky waters of global politics will help construct and identifiable view of foreign policy, and protect the president from the accusations of inconsistency and a lack of planning that dogged Clinton's first term. Clinton was lucky enough to have a booming economy to point to, a luxury Obama does not have.

- Infusing your foreign policy with morals makes it problematic – that's not to say you shouldn't bother, just try to be realistic

Taking office after a period of Nixon/Kissinger *realpolitik*, it is easy to see why framing a foreign policy in terms of human rights and other moral considerations appealed to the Carter administration. It seems clear, also, that a moral approach resonated with Carter's view of how diplomacy should be conducted. However, as the president soon learned, taking a moral view of the complex and dirty world of international politics makes the job considerably harder, as became evident in dealings with the Soviet Union. As Kissinger himself noted in detailing his approach to US foreign policy, 'America's moral righteousness inhibited a flexible diplomacy'.[33] Stripping your approach to foreign relations of moral considerations can, clearly, make it much easier. However, America's peculiarly liberal

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political culture makes such an approach not only unpopular, but also unfathomable for most Americans.[34]

Further, infusing a foreign policy with a moral purpose has clear benefits, in the realm of soft power, and imperatives as the tragic events of Srebrenica and Rwanda in the 1990s, and more recently Homs in Syria, where foreign action was absent, demonstrate. In the grim reality of international politics, the lesson learned from Carter is not that there is no place for morals in foreign policy, but rather that moral considerations, where possible, should form a part of a strategy that is realistic in its aims, and relates ends to means. The alternative, as Carter discovered, is incoherence and inconsistency that breeds either inaction or an *ad hoc* and uneven approach to foreign affairs which can cause more problems than it solves.

- Discussion and debate within the administration is good, but it needs to be controlled

The conflict between Vance and Brzezinski paralysed Carter's decision-making process, which as noted above was suffering from a lack of direction and coherence. Presidents need to be effective bureaucratic managers. Disagreements on policy within the executive are healthy, because they generate creative tension, helping to improve the policy that comes out at the other end. When debate and discussion is discouraged or outright ignored, as was the case in the Nixon White House where Kissinger dominated the process, the resultant decisions can be far from optimal. It would be an interesting counterfactual to consider how America's exit from Vietnam may have been different had a genuine debate occurred on America's negotiating position, rather than having one man – Kissinger – control negotiations.

At the other extreme, however, too much disagreement can cause the bureaucratic inertia that characterised Carter's decision-making process. In this instance, the president needs to get involved, and firmly decide upon a path of action. This may involve upsetting some of your key officials, but if they're used to your decisive manner, they'll accept it. As a side note, when you've chosen your path of action, it'd be best if the 'loser' in the argument is around – when Carter took Brzezinski's side on the Iranian rescue mission, Vance was absent, and understandably resigned in protest when he returned to Washington and found out. The trick is to encourage debate and discussion, but keep a lid on it and remember the task at hand is to develop the best policy. In this sense, Clinton offers a good example. The Clinton White House developed a foreign policy machinery that valued informal face-to-face contact between officials, yet also maintained a solid institutional framework to ensure a smooth policymaking process. This was maintained by strong individuals in key positions with differing views, but at the summit a president who, increasingly confident in foreign affairs, was prepared to listen to all views and then employ a policy. With a team that understood the process and felt as if they all had a role in it, the result was an effective decision-making process.

It is difficult at present to assess how far Obama has learned the lessons of Carter's mismanagement – we only have a Bob Woodward's *Obama's Wars* to refer to. It seems, however, that the president controls his foreign policy and is prepared to follow his desired path. For example, former Defense Secretary Robert Gates was opposed to military action in Libya, yet Obama committed American resources to the air mission which ultimately contributed to the demise of Muammar Gaddafi. Significantly, unlike Vance, Gates did not resign in protest upon being overruled, which suggests a degree of acceptance (of course it is perhaps significant that Gates' retirement was not long off). The key lesson is that the president is in charge, and he needs to remind his entire staff that that is the case.

- You need a bit of luck

When it comes down to it, no matter how proactive you are as president, developing a clear strategy with a moral dimension and constructing a foreign policy team that is working together and constructively, there are things you can't control, some of which have the potential to bring down your presidency. Carter suffered at the polls because of the Iranian hostage crisis; the failure of his rescue mission, whilst undoubtedly a tragedy for the families of those soldiers who lost their lives, was ultimately down to bad luck. In a similar raid, Obama sanctioned the covert mission that led to the death of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. In this case, the mission was a success: no American lives were lost, and the objective was accomplished. Obama can use this as a powerful signal of his foreign policy success. However, had he suffered similar problems to Carter, with, for example, machinery malfunctioning and weather conditions complicating matters, he may now be facing criticism for losing American lives, letting bin Laden

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get away and further damaging relations with Pakistan. So far, Obama has enjoyed some good luck. Carter, on the other hand, experienced quite the opposite.

It is worth reminding ourselves that Jimmy Carter was not, as originally suggested when he left office, a failure in foreign policy. He governed at a difficult time, and enjoyed some notable successes during his single term in office. He also enjoyed some desperately bad luck, which is not an insignificant point. For the current president, however, there are clear warning signs; Barack Obama finds himself in a position not dissimilar to Carter. To date, Obama enjoys a record that his opponent in the upcoming presidential election will find it difficult to challenge. As Obama is surely aware though, foreign policy does not lead to electoral victory, as George H.W. Bush learned in 1992. It can, however, contribute to electoral defeat, as Carter discovered in 1980. The incumbent will do well to learn from his mistakes.

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[34] On this, see Colin Dueck, *Reluctant Crusaders: Power, Culture, and Change in American Grand*

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