

Reagan over Carter:

When Big Energy Triumphed

by G.S. Evans

That Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 election represented a turning point in American political history is commonly recognized. Especially in that the Reagan administration initiated an attack on the American social state (i.e., the many New Deal and Great Society programs that gave us at least the semblance of a social-democratic state) that continues to the present day. But, as the historian Kevin Mattson reminds us in his recent book, *What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President*, the election had a further, in the global scheme of things perhaps even greater, significance than an assault on the social state. Namely, it obliterated what I would call "a moment of historical possibility" in the mid to late 1970s when an increasingly sophisticated awareness by the American people of the ecological and ideological limitations of consumer capitalism was giving impetus to a governmental attempt to capitalize a "sustainable," technologically-oriented segment of the American bourgeoisie.

At a minimum, these forces were moving us in the direction of a more ecological, European-style form of capitalism as opposed to the commodities-based, extractive form of capitalism that triumphed with Reagan's victory. More hopefully, the level of popular awareness of ecological and lifestyle issues made a radical, left-green transformation of society and economy a less desperately distant possi-

bility than it has become in the wake of Reagan's victory.

This historical moment of possibility is best epitomized by, and most eloquently expressed in, a speech that Carter gave to the nation on July 15, 1979. The context of the speech was dramatic, as the United States was in the midst of a severe oil shortage, high inflation, and was experiencing the imme-

diate aftermath of the core meltdown of one of the reactors at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant. In the speech, Carter dared to suggest that limited supplies of energy, and limited American access to the existing supplies of energy, placed real limitations on the vision that America had of itself in the aftermath of World War II as being a society of abundant consumer goods, including gas-guzzling cars and endless tracts of suburban housing, and endless growth.

But Carter went even further than this in the

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speech, suggesting that, even beyond issues of energy, this post-war version of the American Dream was in and of itself problematic. Or, as he put it, “in a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.”

Americans were, according to Carter, at a ... turning point in our history. There are two paths to choose. One is a path I’ve warned about tonight, the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure.

That other path, the path of “common purpose and the restoration of American values” by which America could “seize control again of our common

destiny,” would be forged, according to Carter, on the “battlefield of energy.” In less than 20 years, Carter continued, America had gone from a position of energy self sufficiency to excessive dependence on OPEC and foreign oil. He asserted that this dependence was an intolerable threat “to our economic independence and the very security of our nation.”

To meet this threat, Carter proposed an energy plan that now sounds as though it came from another political universe. The main points of it were: (1) “Beginning this moment,” Carter declared, “this nation will never use more foreign oil than we did in 1977—never;” (2) asking Congress for “the most massive peacetime commitment of funds and resources in our nation’s history to develop America’s own alternative sources of fuel;” (3) a requirement that the nation’s utility companies “cut their massive

use of oil by 50% within the next decade” and switch to other fuels; (4) a “bold conservation program” to involve every American by building conservation into every home and building and allocating an extra 10 billion dollars over the next decade to strengthen public transportation systems.

Carter, of course, was no green radical and the program that he put forth that evening can be seen to represent a kind of enlightened nationalism. Beyond its obvious intent to reassert the country’s energy independence, it also represented an attempt to keep America’s capitalist system from falling into the temptation of using our extractive, imperial and military interventionist potential (epitomized by Texas oil interests and the military-industrial complex) to maintain our world hegemony as opposed to our more purely capitalist technological and entrepreneurial potential (Silicon Valley, modernizing our traditional manufacturing sector).

Carter was supported in this by a widespread, if diffuse, acceptance among the American people of the limitations of the new, energy restricted era that we seemed to be entering in the wake of the various oil shocks and shortages of the 1970s. There was, for example, much public discussion of the need to bring back the mass transit systems and intercity passenger rail routes that had only just been dismantled in the previous 10 to 20 years, as well as the need for Americans to drive smaller and more fuel efficient cars. Also critical to the political consciousness of this historical moment was the lack of enthusiasm for military adventures after the disaster of Vietnam and, in the wake of the counter-culture, a general (though, again, diffuse and not always well articulated) skepticism of consumer culture.

But, in a country historically founded on expansionism and built on massive resource exploitation, the popular acceptance of such a paradigm was fragile. And so it proved to be for Carter: though the initial reaction to his speech was positive, none of his proposals were enacted.

Indeed, when the presidential campaign began later that year Reagan found it easy to distort the meaning of Carter’s speech (and it didn’t help here that Carter was distracted from the long-term nature of his program by Ted Kennedy’s challenging him for the Democratic Party presidential nomination and the Iranian hostage crisis). As Mattson effectively chronicles, Reagan, following the lead of other right-wing critics, ignored the content of Carter’s actual speech, which questioned whether a consumer and materialistic mentality would be adequate to address the major energy crisis that America faced.

Reagan instead replaced it with an interpretation of the speech which held that Carter had been brooding over a psychic state of “malaise” that had taken hold of the American people and made the country ungovernable (thus, it became known as the “malaise” speech, even though Carter never used that

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word). Using his optimistic, movie star persona, Reagan then offered a sweeping vision of continuing American greatness—free of the self-examination, self-sacrifice, or energy independence that Carter’s vision demanded.

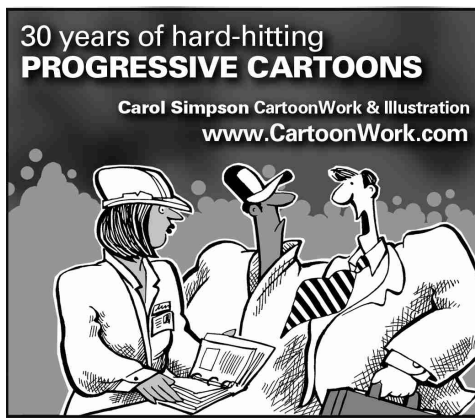
Thus, when Reagan announced his candidacy for the presidency on November 13, 1979, he stated that there were some who argued that “our days of greatness [are] at an end, that a great national malaise is upon us,” before declaring, “I find no national malaise. I find nothing wrong with the American people.” At the conclusion of his speech, when Reagan evoked the image of America as “that shining city on a hill,” he evoked the full-force of right-wing, redemptive American nationalism that has underlain much of American foreign and domestic policy ever since. Namely, that God has bestowed a special grace, responsibility, and mission in the world on America and that God loves Americans as they are; this being the case, the type of self-examination and belief in limitations of which Carter spoke (along with government regulations)

could only hold Americans back from achieving their innate, god-given greatness and world dominance.

After winning the election, Reagan put his vision into action and quickly and systematically began to undo Carter’s energy policies. Thus, instead of increasing spending on public transportation, his administration attempted to phase out all federal subsidies for mass transit (while increasing them for the construction of highways). Reagan not only removed the solar panels that Carter had placed atop the White House, but gutted R&D spending on solar cells—instead of providing 20% of America’s electrical generation by 2000 as Carter had proposed, solar energy now accounts for .01%, while the United States’ global market share of solar cells has gone from 40% to 5%.

Carter’s energy conservation measures, designed to significantly reduce American energy usage, were either rolled back by Reagan or never implemented. Per capita energy consumption therefore climbed at an average 0.8% per annum between 1983 and 1998 before leveling off for the next 10 years. Only with recession of 2008 has it started to decline again. Most tellingly, the US never even attempted to meet Carter’s goal of reducing oil imports to 4.5 million barrels per day by 1990 and the rate currently stands at around 10 million barrels a day.

The energy policy that Reagan put in its place instead focused on two things: publicly, he announced that deregulation was the magic bullet which would guarantee America’s energy needs, be-



cause it would free-up America’s oil companies to produce more oil; behind the scenes, however, because America’s oil reserves were simply not adequate to fuel America’s huge fleet of automobiles or meet its other energy needs, he established a policy of political and military intervention in the Middle East to ensure (as it has indeed been successful in doing) that OPEC could no longer hold America hostage to its oil.

Such an interventionist policy does not come cheaply. When it was combined with a further increase of the military budget to back Reagan’s confrontational approach with the Soviet Union, which was then combined with a large tax cut, it is no surprise that during the Reagan administration the federal deficit grew from 26 % of the GDP in 1980 to 41 % in 1988, the debt itself growing from 900 billion dollars to 2.6 trillion dollars making the United States. This made the United States, once the world’s largest creditor nation, into its largest borrower.

But such realities were of little concern to the Reagan administration. The simple faith that Americans, that is, the Chosen People, need not overly concern themselves over such things as the future of their energy supply because, in the end, everything would work out fine, was quintessential Reagan. The fact, then, that the United States, with 5% of the world’s population, accounts for nearly a quarter of the world’s total energy consumption while at the same time spending nearly as much money on its military as the rest of the world combined spent on theirs, would not have been seen by Reagan as representing a long-term failure of his policy, but rather its success.

That Reagan’s message has a resonance with the American people has been made depressingly clear in the course of the 30-plus years following Reagan’s landslide victory in 1980. It can be seen in the overwhelming triumph of a vulgar, consumer capitalism

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(e.g., in the 5 years after Carter took office, automobiles shrunk in size by over 20%, by 2003, they were larger than they’d ever been before; during that same time, the average size of a house increased by 40%) and the increasing acceptance of capitalistic norms even in the public sphere. In addition, the military-industrial complex not only managed to overcome the “Vietnam syndrome,” that is, the widespread aversion against militarily intervening in foreign countries, but also succeeded in conflating America’s national identity with its imperial war machine.

But Mattson's book helps to remind us that there was a time in recent American history when the expansionistic, consumerist and extractive approaches that Reagan was to play upon were on the defensive, a time when the majority of the American people (who, after all, had elected Carter to be president in 1976) were willing to consider other approaches. And it is important to remember this not only in an historical sense as to what might have been if the United States would have gone in a less consumerist and less energy consumptive direction (especially in how this might have influenced China's burgeoning development away from the grossly consumerist path it has taken and kept it more along the lines it was already on at the time, e.g., emphasizing bicycles instead of cars), but also in a contemporary sense.

Contemporary in that we can take hope from that historical moment that the American people might once again become open to a different way of

doing things. That the long dormant counter-cultural, anti-consumerist inclinations that found expression at that time could once again (perhaps with our help) come to the fore and displace those inclinations that make people want to buy a Ford F-150 pickup with which to do their grocery shopping and a 3,000 square foot home filled with consumer electronic goods in which to live.

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Note

"What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?" Jimmy Carter, America's "Malaise," and the Speech that Should Have Changed the Country, by Kevin Mattson, Bloomsbury, USA, 2009, 288 pages, ISBN-13: 978-1608192069. \$16.00.