

His Missteps Could Strengthen Carter

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

It may not cheer the Carter camp to realize it, but the missteps of the last month might prove to be the best thing that could have happened to Jimmy Carter. I am not speaking of his electoral prospects; the series of careless remarks have clearly hurt Carter's election chances, and it will take three weeks of effective, competent campaigning to win the Presidency most people thought he could not lose.

But if Jimmy Carter and those close to him take a clear-headed look at what went wrong and why, if they avoid the temptation to blame outsiders or the press for their mistakes, then a Carter administration may find that the headaches of 1976 gave it a valuable series of lessons.

The whole essence of the Carter campaign, fascinating to some, unsettling to others, lies in its emphasis on *character over constituencies*. Unlike George McGovern or Barry Goldwater, who campaigned on a specific series of grievances to be redressed, unlike a Hubert Humphrey, whose national constituency is clear and relatively permanent, Jimmy Carter based his campaign on the premise that Americans have lost trust in their leaders, and that he could restore that trust by his presence and his example.

In fact, Carter proved through the spring that he was an attractive, sometimes compelling figure. But the virtually unbroken path from New Hampshire to the nomination meant that he never had to attempt the next step: to link his character and his campaign to America's disparate constituencies. He never had to explain clearly enough what he intended to do with the trust we were to place in him and how he was to do it.

This confidence—or arrogance—was most clearly illustrated by the six weeks after his nomination. Instead of traveling around America, Carter drew dozens of reporters to Plains, Ga., to further bombard the voters with the story of Carter And His Roots: softball games, fish fries, brother Billy's gas station, Amy's lemonade stand and all. "Learn about me," Carter seemed to say, "and you will know why I will make a good President."

Imagine the possibilities had this posture carried Jimmy Carter into the White House as easily as it carried him to the nomination. We have had unhappy experiences with the last two Presidents to win popular and electoral landslides. Both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon seemed to see in themselves an embodiment of the national will, above the normal ebb and flow of politics. In both cases, the magnitude of their victories helped to create a kind of arrogance that later would prove politically fatal.

But now, after what seemed like an unbroken march from obscurity to political "comer" to shoo-in President, Jimmy Carter has felt the impact of national doubt, national uneasiness, even national ridicule. He has seen firsthand that his presence may not ignite the faithful; that his speeches may produce massive indifference; that his character may be as open to doubt as that of any mortal. He has also seen that an effort to make character the centerpiece of a campaign is often dangerous in a land whose communications system has an insatiable obsession with the sensational,

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the personal, the trivial. To stress personality to the American press is like preaching the virtues of marijuana on the Berkeley campus.

In other words, Carter has seen that he is as susceptible to American skepticism as any other political figure. He has seen that the lack of trust which pervades our political process can affect him as much as any "traditional" politician. (How must this apostle of trust feel when he reads news reports of massive apathy among lunch-bucket Democrats and working-class blacks in Pennsylvania, the state that put him in front of the nomination race for good). He has seen that his personality, linked to wearisome repetitions of Democratic saints and Republican sinners, is not the way to stir enthusiasm and restore trust.

If Carter survives these setbacks and wins the Presidency, the Jimmy Carter who enters the White House in January would be very different from the Jimmy Carter who was nominated last July in New York. It would be a Carter made sharply aware that he is not a figure of universal adoration; and that people will not accept his word that he knows where we wish to be led.

Recent indications suggest that Carter has learned some of these lessons. He and his staff are not blaming the press for his own blunders. He has acknowledged his mistakes.

Instead Carter has in recent days returned to the political, rather than the personal roots of his campaign. He has returned to the theme of entrenched power, unfair and unaccountable privilege, and to the need to open the government to the excluded. In last Wednesday's foreign policy debate, for instance, he repeatedly stressed the theme that the American people ought to be more involved in the foreign policy decision-making process.

If this "populist" appeal proves successful—if Carter gains the White House through his championing of social justice rather than through the portrayal of pleasant personality—then the mistakes of this fall will have proven invaluable. For they will have forced Carter to set an agenda for America instead of having it settle down for a reassuring chat.

This is small consolation to the embattled Carter campaign now. But these difficulties may well make for a far more successful Carter administration in the coming years.

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