
The Return of Carterism?

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AMONG THE first duties of the Obama presidency, all agree, is the restoration of America's standing in the world. Poll after poll has shown how unpopular America is overseas, from London to Damascus to Beijing. Nor is there much disagreement as to the reason. As Fareed Zakaria puts it in *The Post-American World*, the reason is the "arrogance" displayed by the Bush administration—an arrogance that has blinded Americans to the fact that they can no longer push other nations around at will, and that their country now inhabits a multi-polar world.

The bill of particulars is by now drearily familiar. In the Middle East, Bush's war in Iraq not only overstretched our military but radically alienated the UN and our European allies and undermined our position as an honest broker elsewhere, particularly on the issue of Palestinian statehood. Further damage to the American image was wrought by Bush's refusal to abide by the Kyoto protocols on global warming, by the scandals over Abu Ghraib and the detainees at Guantanamo Bay, by the recklessness of our handling of Iran and its pursuit of nuclear weapons, by our needless provocations of Russia over missile defense in Eastern Eu-

rope and our encouragement of Georgian adventurism. All in all, to listen to Bush's myriad critics, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev had it just about right in assailing "the arrogant course of [an] administration which hates criticism and prefers unilateral decisions."

Hence the air of expectancy hovering around the Obama presidency, the sense of a new era dawning and a more hopeful direction taking shape. Obama's own formulation of that hopeful new direction appeared last summer in an essay in *Foreign Affairs*. "The American moment is not over," wrote the then-candidate, "but [it] needs a new burst of visionary leadership." Promising a definitive end to the Bush doctrine, whose serial abuses had made the world lose "trust in our purposes and principles," Obama foresaw an era of "sustained, direct, and aggressive diplomacy" that would rebuild America's alliances and deal successfully with global threats ranging from terrorism to climate change.

America's other important foreign-policy goal, Obama wrote, was reducing global poverty: the root cause, in his view, of terrorism and political extremism around the world. By "sharing more of our riches to help those most in need," by building up the social and economic "pillars of a just society" both at home and abroad, America could bring security and stability to the entire world—if, he added, the task were undertaken "not in the spirit of a patron but in the spirit of a partner—a partner mindful of his own imperfections."

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In short, instead of being the world's swaggering policeman, America would become the world's self-effacing social worker. The sentiment is hardly unique to Obama; it was a point of virtually unanimous agreement among those competing with him for the Democratic nomination. Specifically, it was the view of Hillary Clinton, his arch-rival and now his nominee as Secretary of State. In her own *Foreign Affairs* article (November-December 2007), she, too, blasted the Bush administration for its "unprecedented course of unilateralism," which had "squandered the respect, trust, and confidence of even our closest allies and friends." And she, too, promised a new start, focusing on international cooperation and multilateralism, exhausting every avenue of diplomacy before resorting to military action, "avoiding false choices driven by ideology," and devoting our resources to problems like global warming and third-world poverty. If pursued sincerely and consistently, such a course, she was confident, would keep us safe, restore America's image, and win the respect of the planet.

OR WOULD it? For a little historical perspective, it might be useful to look at the last President who embraced exactly the same analysis of America's foreign-policy problems and enacted exactly the same strategy for resolving them.

"The result of the 1976 election," Michael Barone writes, "was Democratic government as far as the eye could see." After the debacle of Vietnam, Jimmy Carter entered office determined to clean up America's image abroad. Abetting him in his endeavor was the fact that Democrats controlled both houses of Congress by a substantial majority, while Republicans were broken and dispirited. Much as with Obama and his team today, the basic operating assumption of the Carter team was that U.S. assertiveness abroad, or what Senator William Fulbright called America's "arrogance of power," had become the primary source of international tension. It was time for a humbler, gentler posture: the post-World War II Pax Americana was over, discredited by Vietnam, and so were the cold-war assumptions on which it was based.

From Carter's point of view, the United States could win the world's trust again by helping to shape a more equitable international order. The polarities dictated by the U.S.-Soviet conflict had grown stale; the cold war itself had become increasingly irrelevant to the future of the planet, to what the Thomas Friedmans of that day were beginning to call "the global village." Instead, the emerging division was between rich and poor, be-

tween the developed and the developing worlds.

In words eerily foreshadowing those of Barack Obama decades later, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who would become Carter's national security adviser, wrote in *Between Two Ages* that the future tasks of foreign policy lay not with the "political" issues of war and peace but with the "human issues" of poverty and development. Washington's "preoccupation" with "national supremacy," Brzezinski declared, would have to yield to a global perspective—a perspective that, in another parallel with today's arguments, many then thought peculiarly well suited to America's lowered status in a world featuring such exciting phenomena as the rise of the "non-aligned movement" and the Third World. Above all, in Brzezinski's view, Americans had to understand that using military force to shape the course of events, as we were disastrously trying to do in Vietnam, was not the cure but rather the *cause* of international crises; an America that hoped to be on the right side of history would have to learn to be less assertive.

As for the Soviet Union (concerning which Brzezinski happened to be a hawk), Carter himself intended to dispel what he would famously describe as our "inordinate fear of Communism." Toward that end, he would proffer a hand of trust to a Moscow understandably suspicious of American imperial designs. This would eventuate in his proposing and signing a far more comprehensive arms-control agreement than Richard Nixon's SALT I. It would also entail decreasing America's military footprint around the globe, as in South Korea, where Carter felt that the presence of American troops hindered a peaceful unification of the peninsula. He even contemplated giving direct aid to the victorious Communist government in Vietnam.

HOW DID all this work out in practice? It would be a gross understatement to say that reality proved a more complex and obdurate substance than was dreamed of in Carter's philosophy. A few examples may suffice, starting with Latin and Central America—an area high on Carter's list for healing the supposed split between the developed and developing world.

One priority for Carter was giving up control of the Panama Canal—a symbol of the bad old days of homegrown *Yanqui* interventionism. In April 1978, he scored his first (and only) foreign-policy success when the Senate ratified the Panama Canal treaty. The agreement, it was said, would inaugurate a bright new future for the tiny Central American country and, by extension, for Latin American

relations in general. Unfortunately, with the Americans gone, Panama descended into a twilight world of corruption and violence and became a hub of the international drug trade. Successive dictators skimmed the proceeds of Canal traffic to entrench their power and oppress the Panamanian people. Eventually, under George Bush, Sr., American soldiers would have to be sent to topple Panama's last and worst dictator, Manuel Noriega, thus providing a bitterly ironic ending to the era of non-interventionism.

But Panama was in some ways a side show, if a symptomatic one. Underlying Carter's entire approach to Latin America was his new stress on human rights as a touchstone of American foreign policy. "We can no longer separate the traditional issues of war and peace," he declared at Notre Dame University in 1978, "from the new global questions of peace, justice, and human rights." This was a bold statement, and on the face of it there was everything to recommend it—assuming, that is, that the yardstick of human rights was to be applied universally. But it turned out that Carter meant to apply it with extreme selectivity, and less as a yardstick than as a stick with which to beat our friends.

The argument went like this. In thrall to our cold-war mentality, we had been in the habit of reflexively backing right-wing dictators whose only virtue was that they were anti-Communist and pro-U.S. In so doing, we had betrayed our own democratic principles, in full view of a shocked and disgusted world. The time had come to reverse gears. Henceforth, Carter proclaimed, governments that violated their own citizens' human rights would no longer receive American support but would instead incur our opposition. A foreign policy so constructed would, theoretically, encourage the growth of democracy in third-world countries and reduce the appeal of more radical or revolutionary ideologies.

IN THE EVENT, the opposite happened. As Jeane Kirkpatrick pointed out at the time, instead of paving the way to democracy, the withdrawal of support from petty dictators in Latin America paved the way for a surrender of American interests—at the expense of our hopes for democratization.* The only countries on which the U.S. could bring significant pressure to bear were those ruled by authoritarians who restricted certain freedoms while leaving others intact; by contrast, we enjoyed little or no leverage at all with totalitarian regimes that systematically destroyed all freedoms and treated us as their ideological enemy.

Thus the fallacy turned out to be not the old

cold-war mentality but the new Carter human-rights policy. When we ceased supporting our bad allies, they were replaced by far worse antagonists. It had happened before in Cuba, where Batista was overthrown by Castro, and it was happening again in Nicaragua, where in the spring of 1977 the Carter administration, displeased with the corrupt, small-minded, and frequently brutal Somoza regime, cut off all aid to the Nicaraguan military in its war against the Sandinista insurgency.

In Carter's view, allowing Anastasio Somoza to fall would demonstrate what Stephen Rosenfeld of the *Washington Post* called America's "post-Vietnam intent," and that intent would be further confirmed by our accepting the legitimacy of "progressive" movements like the Sandinistas. In July, when the latter triumphantly seized power, American representatives met with their leadership; in December, Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher stated that the "driving consensus among Nicaraguans" was "to build a new Nicaragua through popular participation."

Christopher was mistaken. Somoza's fall resulted in a bloody and drawn-out civil war that would cost the lives of some 50,000 Nicaraguans. The Sandinistas exploited the fact of an indigenous resistance movement, led by the *contras*, as reason to solidify their Castroite regime—precisely what Carter had assured Americans would not happen. In time, Nicaragua would become a key conduit for exporting Cuban influence and support to Communist insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Thus did the supposedly outdated "domino theory," an artifact of the cold war, emerge as a highly accurate predictor of what would happen in Latin America after the fall of Nicaragua. And not only in Latin America: by focusing obsessively on the presumptive split between developed and developing nations, Carter had turned the United States into a passive spectator while a global shift of power was taking place to the advantage of the Soviet Union and its proxies. Cam Rahn Bay in Vietnam became the Soviet Union's most important forward Pacific base. Pro-Soviet regimes consolidated their power in Africa, instituting Marxist economic policies that, in Ethiopia alone, brought about a massive famine and the death of hundreds of thousands. Over Christmas 1979, Soviet tanks and troops rolled into Afghanistan—just six months after Carter had embraced and kissed Soviet president Leonid Brezhnev and publicly praised his cooperativeness in the conduct of world affairs.

*"Dictatorships and Double Standards," COMMENTARY, November 1979.

THE ONE area where Carter seemed fitfully to grasp the nature of reality was in relation to Iran. Having inherited the Nixon-Ford commitment to the authoritarian Shah Mohammed Reza as a key American “proxy” in the Middle East, the administration found itself squeezed between its need for an ally in a strategically sensitive region and its selectively defined human-rights agenda. In 1977, tilting in one direction, Carter received the shah in the White House. The following January, the President paid a visit to Tehran and at a banquet toasted the shah’s regime as “an island of stability in a turbulent corner of the world.”

Having made it appear that Washington approved of the regime’s brutal practices, which included jailing and torturing thousands of Iranians, and having compounded the error by making the shah appear to be America’s puppet, Carter then tilted all the way in the other direction by backing America *out* of Iran even as the shah’s grip on power tottered and collapsed in the face both of genuine popular protest and of the Islamist campaign waged against him by the exiled Ayatollah Khomeini. By December 1978, Carter announced that the United States “would not get directly involved” in keeping the shah in power. “That,” he said, “is a decision for the Iranian people to make.” What few knew at the time was that Carter and his principal advisers, including Brzezinski, were urging the shah to crack down, something he refused to do unless he could announce to the world that the United States had ordered him to kill Iranian protesters.

In the end, the shah chose to run rather than fight, abdicating his throne and fleeing the country on January 16, 1979. The ironies were cruel. One was that a President publicly committed to supporting human rights and ending support for dictators had wound up urging a dictator to shoot his own citizens in the streets. Another was that the United States had lost its “island of stability” in the Middle East—and lost it, moreover, to Khomeini, who would soon present to the world an exceptionally vicious demonstration of the distinction between authoritarianism and outright totalitarianism.

The fall of the shah, the possibility that a Khomeini-dominated Iran might end up in the Soviet orbit, and, finally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan finally forced Carter to deal with the geopolitical realities of the cold war, the very conflict that he and his advisers had insisted was irrelevant to the world’s future. After three years of watching his utopian hopes for the world dissolve, Carter had belatedly discovered the virtues of a robust and assertive

American foreign policy. It was in this new mood that he declared an increase in American defense spending, the first since the end of the Vietnam war. It was in the same mood that in April 1980 he finally authorized an attempt by the U.S. military to rescue 52 Americans held hostage since the seizure of the American embassy five and a half months earlier. But the effort was doomed almost from the start. Badly conceived, insufficiently manned or supported, and obsessively micromanaged from the White House, the rescue attempt ended in death and disaster, the administration’s final foreign-policy fiasco and a low point for American prestige.

Through it all, Carter still refused to consider any decisive use of military force. He refused to send aid to anti-Communist rebels in Afghanistan; he refused to use the U.S. military to prevent the Nicaraguan Sandinistas from supporting Marxist guerrillas in neighboring countries; he refused to consider any stronger action against the Iranian hostage-takers; and he expressed disgust when Ronald Reagan, his opponent in the November 1980 election, called them “barbarians” and “criminals.”

IN SUM, Carter’s attempt to soften America’s profile in the world had left the United States in the most perilous position it had known since the Korean war. Soaring oil prices, especially after the fall of the shah, had made a shambles of the global economic order. New Soviet proxies held power in nearly a dozen states in East Asia, Africa, the Middle East (including Afghanistan and South Yemen), and Latin America. More than 85,000 Soviet troops occupied Afghanistan; 35,000 Cuban troops were in Africa. Russian and Cuban military advisers operated in countries like Ethiopia, South Yemen, Mozambique, and Angola with impunity. Soviet SS-20 missiles had been installed specifically to threaten Western Europe and intimidate the NATO alliance.

Even worse, the Soviet Union had become a major military power in the Western hemisphere. At Cienfuegos in Cuba, Soviet warships, submarines, and Backfire bombers enjoyed access to air strips and naval facilities, much as they did at Cam Rahn Bay in Vietnam. A Soviet combat brigade was training Cuban soldiers in the art of anti-tank warfare—admittedly, not very helpful for fighting in the jungles of Central America, but very useful for future operations in places like Ethiopia, the Horn of Africa, or the Arabian peninsula. Russian reconnaissance flights off the east coast of North America were becoming frequent, and so was electronic surveillance of American telephone

and cable traffic. Meanwhile, the Cubans and Sandinistas were continuing to supply insurgencies in Guatemala and El Salvador. In 1979, the tiny island country of Grenada had become a full-fledged Cuban ally and a staging ground for expanding Communist influence in the Caribbean.

The one place where Carter and his defenders could point to success was with the Camp David accord between Egypt and Israel in September 1978. But the exception was only apparent, and in any case proved the rule. For a bilateral Israel-Egypt agreement was not something Carter had sought or welcomed. Quite the contrary: his Middle East policy rested on achieving a “comprehensive” settlement with all parties to the Arab-Israel conflict, and with the active participation of the same Soviet Union whose forces had only recently been kicked out of Egypt by President Anwar Sadat. The visit of Sadat to Israel in November 1977 thus came as an unpleasant surprise.

For nearly a year, the White House fought against a separate peace deal between the two countries, and it was only out of a kind of desperation that Carter finally decided to call the Camp David meeting. By then, both Sadat and Begin were more than ready for a final agreement; for both men, the chief virtue of an American commitment lay in the hope that it would prevent the USSR and its Arab allies, including the PLO, from derailing the peace they had struck between themselves.* So much for multilateralism.

IN JANUARY 1981, Ronald Reagan and his foreign-policy team came into office determined to reverse the post-Vietnam trend of declining American power and the Carterite assumptions that rationalized and justified it. For them, the world’s dividing line ran not between the rich and the poor but between the enslaved and the free.

Reagan believed that by promoting American interests and defending America’s friends, we would benefit both ourselves and millions of others all around the world. Some, like our NATO allies in Europe, would benefit directly, under the umbrella of collective security. Others, like the emerging nations of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, would benefit indirectly, as a resurgence of American confidence revved the engines of global economic growth and protected peoples from subjugation by others.

Far from seeing American military supremacy as a provocation, Reagan proudly defended America’s record as “the greatest force for peace in the world” precisely because America was free as well as strong.

His policy would consist of an unashamed, unapologetic assertion of American exceptionalism and an application of, in his words, “the timeless truths and values Americans have always cherished to the realities of today’s world.” In the process, Reagan would establish a new paradigm for American foreign policy, or, rather, he would re-establish, under a conservative Republican banner, the liberal foundations of the post-World War II Pax Americana stretching back through Presidents Johnson and Kennedy to Truman.

This is hardly to say that Reagan’s conduct of foreign policy was without flaws, or that his successor, George Bush, Sr., who presided over the collapse of the Soviet Union and the breaking-up of its empire, did not commit his own blunders, both major and minor. But Reagan and Bush’s reassertion of the Pax Americana, instead of wrecking our international image or alienating our allies, not only helped build a series of highly successful international coalitions and united fronts but also freed up the forces of globalization, making possible an unprecedented future growth of international trade and thereby undergirding the prosperity of the Clinton years.

We need not linger over those years or over Bill Clinton’s own foreign policy, which vacillated wildly from Carter-style multilateralism, accompanied by deep cuts in the U.S. defense budget, to a post-Rwanda, post-Bosnia activism applied in an often incoherent and ad-hoc fashion. Nor need we rehearse the story of George W. Bush’s tenure in office—an eight-year period marked at the beginning by a deep wariness toward international commitments and “nation-building” and then, after, 9/11, by a dramatic return to the basics of American exceptionalism and a resounding commitment to the expansion of freedom and democracy. The point is that between the two of them, Clinton hesitantly and Bush wholeheartedly, post-World War II American foreign policy turned away from the humbler, gentler multilateralist model of the Carter years and, in so doing, reverted to form.

Now Barack Obama comes into office, trailing clouds of Carterite rhetoric and Carteresque ideas about the inutility of military force, the sovereign worth of “aggressive diplomacy” (an incoherent and meaningless phrase), and the need to accommodate ourselves to a world in which we are no longer even an *economic* superpower, let alone an example to mankind. Of Carter himself, it might be said in mitigation that he assumed the presiden-

* See Robert W. Tucker, “Behind Camp David,” COMMENTARY, November 1978.

cy at an exceptionally bad moment, in the wake of a humiliating withdrawal from Vietnam and in an atmosphere of defeatism among many prominent figures in the political establishment and, among others, a feeling of positive revulsion toward both the ends and the means of American power. Carter was wrong to think that the way forward was to adopt, wholesale, the arguments of the anti-Vietnam-war movement—wrong in theory, and dangerously wrong in practice. Still, one can understand why, in the circumstances, someone of his bent might have come to the position he did.

But today? When Iraq, the most egregious example of Bush's supposedly reckless zeal to go it alone, is turning out to be a success, reaffirming the rightness of America's cause and the soundness of the postwar vision? Why adopt, today, the arguments

and proposals of those who still pretend that Iraq has been nothing but a sordid failure, or who hold that the fact of its success proves nothing whatsoever about who we are and what we stand for?

Some of Obama's early choices for high-level foreign-policy positions—particularly General James Jones as National Security Adviser and the incumbent Robert Gates as Secretary of Defense—suggest that the President-elect may be reconsidering his priorities. One can only hope so. In his book *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger writes that the experience of history is a statesman's one sure guide. As the historical experience of the last 30 years has demonstrated over and over again, and as the historical experience of the last eight years underlines once more with blinding clarity, Carterism is not the way.