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# Jimmy Carter's Lonely Pulpit

by AMITAI ETZIONI

**D**espite some recent success in the Mideast peace talks, the President still has to learn that it takes more than a few prayers and public appeals to pass legislation in this mundane world.

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Carter's first two years on the domestic front were a long way from the imperial presidency: "ineffectual" about sums up his half-term. Many more programs were launched than floated, and most of those that were not shipwrecked were so drastically restructured in the process that the much-hailed victories are largely pyrrhic.

Several theories have been advanced about Carter's poor leadership: his personal lack of experience in the ways of Washington, D.C.; the inexperience of the Georgia kids' brigade that surrounds him; his preoccupation with details (from the specifics of each of scores of new bills to the use of the White House tennis courts); his training as an engineer; his uninspiring style.

While some or even all of the above may well have played a role, beyond personality and leadership-style, we see the major difficulty on the side of social forces, political and social structure.

What stands in Carter's way more than anything else is a deep misunderstanding of the working of the American polity between elections, a quest for public and congressional support instead of building a solid alliance with a coalition of politically mobilized social groupings that can provide sup-

port in Congress and that constitutes significant chunks of the public. It is my thesis that by seeking to avoid entanglements with such "interest groups," the Carter program falls prey to the most insidious special interests. By attempting to mobilize "the people," rather than working with their organized and politically effective groups (such as labor unions, ethnic and racial organizations, church groups, professional associations), the program is cast into a political vacuum, where it is mauled by the lobbies.

In the American political system, it is only during elections that the public at large (at least the approximate half that votes) is *relatively* important. During elections, the pivotal action that makes and breaks presidents takes place by the aggregation of millions of individual acts—the casting of ballots.

However, between presidential elections, the role of the public at large is comparatively small. It obviously cannot unseat the president, nor even most senators; and it is preoccupied with other concerns. During these four-year intervals, America is governed first and foremost by interest groups—or, to be more specific, by coalitions of interest groups. Since practically all domestic programs require congressional action, and since no single group is able to push major programs through Congress by itself, the program ideas or reforms that tend to be enacted are those that build a *majority* coalition of interest groups—not voters!—in their favor. The smaller, poorly coordinated or less mobilized countercoalition, in contrast, is typically outmaneuvered.

It follows that a president who seeks to get a large variety of programs through Congress must build a supportive coalition of interest groups around his administration. This is achieved by

developing programs already favored by these groups and by appealing to their implicit social philosophies and "touching base" with them before the programs are launched. Johnson's effectiveness, for example, was not merely dependent on the manipulation of individual senators and representatives, but was also grounded in his ability to recognize and deal with influential interest groups.

Before Johnson sent his proposal—ultimately, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965—to Congress, his administration held a series of meetings with the two major interest groups that represented opposing sides of educational issues: the National Education Association and the National Catholic Welfare Conference. The meetings produced consensus on the pivotal point that had caused previous bills to become bogged down in Congress—aid to church-supported schools. Once both of these groups had approved a way of directing major funds to aid children in poor areas, regardless of the type of school, the proposal passed both houses of Congress without major changes. Similarly, to secure the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Johnson had the assistance of the highly coordinated Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, a coalition of approximately 80 groups.

The White House is currently presided over by a preacher-technician who oscillates between evolving programs that may be technically solid but are apolitical, developed without first working with any political coalition and without linking into any social philosophy or national base. He then seeks support by appealing to "the public" by evoking some noble sentiments. This approach might work in election campaigns but has little consequence during between-election years. (Most citizens do not even write or call their congresspersons. If they do, on one issue, they take no such action on others.) Moreover, organized groups, from the National Rifle Association to Common Cause, can generate more mail, phone calls and contributions (used to arouse the public at large) than any random, faceless "public."

Americans have long considered interest groups a dirty word, a way to encourage a corrupt, rather than an effective, government. The civic textbook of democracy calls for the president to be chosen by the people, then to deal with the elected representatives (i.e., Congress), who in turn are accountable to the voters, leaving the president free from any other between-

election influences. Indeed, several pundits praised Carter for following this textbook notion. James Reston lauded Carter for having "the audacity to face up to the most difficult national and international problems of our time." He went on to list the lobbies Carter ignored: "the labor lobby, the Israeli lobby, the oil and gas lobby and the automobile lobby, to begin with. Also, the lobbies for blacks, the Chicanos, the cities, the farmers and abortion."

A similar encompassing view of interest groups is advanced by columnist Meg Greenfield who categorizes special interests as including not only the rich and powerful, but also civil servants, small farmers, coal miners and wage earners strapped by climbing social-security taxes.

Recently, Carter himself echoed this same definition of interest groups. Anticipating opposition to his proposed budget cutbacks for fiscal year 1980, the president said he was "perfectly willing to meet any special-interest group, no matter how benevolent, and hold my own in spite of the political consequences."

This view is exceedingly naive, especially because it disregards major differences among interest groups. There are three main kinds of interest groups, plus a large variety of mixtures among those three. At one extreme are the traditional lobbies that brazenly promote their own interests, even if this means blocking auto safety, anti-pollution devices or cancer controls. These groups include not only special industries (oil, steel, tobacco growers), but also labor unions (e.g., when they seek favors for their members, such as the opposition of longshoremen to the use of foreign vessels), nursing-home owners (who blocked most

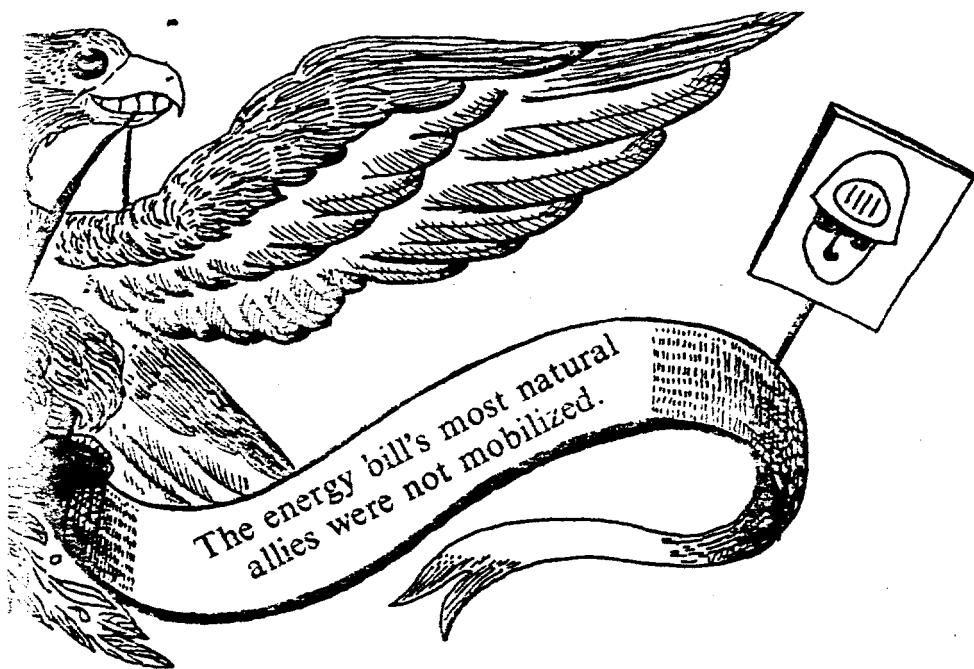
efforts to stop the abuses of patients) and endless others.

At the opposite extreme are the public-interest groups, whose main purpose is to advance one or more aspects of the common good, as they see it, to be sure, but usually of as much benefit to all Americans as to their members. These groups include the largely white, middle-class Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), campaigning for minority rights; the National Council of Churches, for increased foreign aid; and Common Cause, working to curb lobbyist activities.

Finally, by far the most important, are the political outlets of organized groups that represent a multitude of needs, interests and values of large segments of the American public. These include the business community (as distinct from any one particular industry), the workers (not just those of one union), farmers, black Americans and so on. Together, these groups make up the bulk of the American polity.

Of course, presidents—especially those subject to reelection—want to please all major segments of the public. But sooner or later a president in office (as distinct from a presidential campaigner) must choose, implicitly or explicitly, which interest groups (especially of the third widely based kind) his administration considers its main constituencies, which groups it seeks to "also" carry in an effort to widen its sociopolitical base and which groups it may have to write off. A president might be elected on the basis of a vague mood by using slogans that have wide appeal and cut across most group lines; but the task of actually governing, especially on the domestic front, tends to entail frustrating some groups while pleasing others.





A president who does not have the backing of such organized groups, and who has no coalition-building strategy, is likely to fall prey to the most narrow, brazen special interests. Since his programs are sent to Congress politically naked, these lobbies can go to work, often behind the scenes, without having to contend with the countervailing effects of the widely based organized groupings. This is well illustrated by the sorry history of the energy and tax-reform legislations and other proposals.

**Object Lesson Number One: Energy**

The Carter administration views the energy bill as the centerpiece of its domestic program, its number-one priority. This complex program was hastily evolved by an inhouse team of technical experts who barely touched base with any political group. While the environmentalists, Naderites and other consumer groups were quite pleased with several of its elements as initially drafted, they were distressed about not having been consulted and were antagonized by several nonessential elements of the package (such as the use of "increasing amounts" of nuclear energy). Thus, the initial bill's most natural allies were not mobilized.

In terms of appealing to organized social groups, the original energy bill (subsequently turned so inside out that its content is nearly forgotten) might well have found favor with large segments of groups that ally themselves with the Democratic party, along with groups that cut across into independent and Republican territories. In its initial format, the bill focused heavily on protecting the consumer rather than providing new profit opportunities for producers, and it stressed conservation rather than development. Conservation was to be achieved by sharply increas-

ing the price of domestic gas and oil by imposing taxes at the wellhead. Via rebates, energy stamps and increased tax cuts, consumers would get back most of the revenue generated through these energy taxes. Thus, consumers would suffer little, if any, loss in total buying power; but they would be economically motivated to spend less on high-energy items (to buy less gas, for example) and to invest more in products that consume less energy (such as bicycles). This original approach of the energy bill was inherently in line with what labor unions, liberals, consumer groups and environmentalists found quite attractive.

When the energy bill hit the Hill, much happened to it, as has already been reported and need not be discussed here. One central development is relevant to this thesis, and that is that the oil and gas industries went to work to undermine many of the program's central features. Instead of conservation, this lobby promoted the development of new energy sources and insisted that either there be no taxes on energy or that the revenues generated by energy be plowed back to the energy industry for development costs—and profits—rather than to the public. Since the Carter bill was not actively supported by its natural allies, the lobby's efforts were quite effective. Those potential allies, aside from not being consulted and mobilized, were actually antagonized on other fronts. This is an essential point because, unlike lobbies, organized social groups have a multiplicity of interests and, at least implicitly, a social philosophy. If one does not ally with them on general grounds, it is difficult to mobilize them on specific issues. (Thus, it would be unrealistic to expect ADA and the National Council of Churches to lobby for the

president's energy bill when he seems remote from their liberal sentiments and positions on a variety of social programs.)

And once the oil and gas lobby, supported by several business groups, started to gain its way, the White House had to make concessions to it in hopes of getting the energy bill through Congress. Hence, the tax rebate was cut and funds for development were increased. Soon the unions, environmental groups and consumers found the bill unsupportable, which, in turn, made the oil and gas lobby more powerful. At one recent calculation, of the \$47 billion to be generated by the bill (which is, of course, not yet in its final form), \$40 billion would land in industry and only \$7 billion with consumers—but the oil and gas lobby is demanding still more.

Thus, because it lacked the firm support of widely based interest groups, the energy bill fell prey to precisely those special interests that the preacher-technician sought to avoid.

**Lesson Two: Tax "Reform"**

The history of the Carter administration's tax bill, quite different from the energy bill in detail but similar in sociopolitical dynamics, serves as another illustration of the deeper reasons for Carter's persisting political deadlock.

The administration's initial plans for a new tax bill called for various reforms and tax reductions for the majority of Americans, combined with some concessions to corporations and to the business community. When the U.S. Treasury came up with its first draft of the tax bill in mid-1977, the president reportedly sent it back as "not bold enough" in its reform sweep. At that time, Carter planned to tax capital gains (which he referred to as "unearned income") at regular rates and to reduce the tax rates on individuals from 70 to 50 percent for the top tax bracket, and from 14 to 10 percent for the bottom. Loopholes, from business entertainment to export subsidies (which help corporations, not exports) were to be closed. Tax revenues generated by these measures were to be used to cover the revenue loss caused by tax cuts.

The tax bill was developed by experts in the Treasury and the White House, in touch with only a few individuals outside the White House and without the backing of any coalition of sociopolitical groups.

Retrenchment occurred even before the bill was sent to Congress. This resulted from an attempt to take into account the mood of the general pub-

lic, which was quite uninterested in tax reform (a Roper-H&R Block poll found only 24 percent of Americans desired such reform), and from the Carter team's alleged new political savvy and sensitivity to the Hill's preferences (such as Treasury proposals for taxation of social-security benefits, interest on life insurance policies and an end to the accelerated depreciation of buildings).

The thinned-out reform package hit the Hill without any wide-based political muscle, and with the increasing antagonism toward Carter of blacks, liberals, unions and Jews. In such an atmosphere, the special-interest groups freely went to work: the restaurant lobby was mobilized into swing by the proposal to eliminate half the deduction for what Carter calls "the \$50, three-martini lunch"; business interests sought to reduce taxes on capital gains; and exporters attempted to keep their privileges under DISC. The total effect of such lobby activities is not yet known—but it is certainly quite predictable.

#### **Other Bills**

Other items on the rich agenda Carter sent to Congress reflect somewhat different variations of the same basic theme. The welfare reform, developed in an intraadministration struggle between the Departments of Labor and Health, Education and Welfare, but with precious little outside consultation or mobilization of support, is marooned like a sailboat without any wind. The bill to create a federal consumer protection agency sank, a fate that is probably awaiting the hospital cost-curbing act, as well.

The bills that did pass, such as the minimum-wage increase, were promoted by Carter so reluctantly and so belatedly—as a grinding concession to organized social groups rather than in close coalition with them—that very little political capital was gained, capital that could have been cashed in to support other programs.

Bills drafted for environmental protection (through clean-air standards, federal regulation of strip mining and the scrapping of water projects deemed damaging to the environment) initially pleased the environmentalists a great deal. However, the White House thinned out one of these bills after another, accepting the funding of some water projects previously deemed harmful to the environment and delaying the introduction of certain pollution controls. The result is that Carter's support from even these environmentalist groups is not as strong as it used to be.

#### **What Base?**

If Carter were to return to another Camp David review session, he might come up with a few isolated "get-tough" speeches that would gain him, at best, some temporary points in public opinion polls, at the cost of antagonizing major segments of the polity, such as lawyers and physicians. What the president needs to devise is a comprehensive strategy for a sociopolitical base on which he can build to gain the necessary backing for most of his programs.

Here the most viable option would be to fashion a new coalition combining traditional Democratic constituencies with groupings of the new middle class (especially college-educated, above-average-income groups), without actively courting big business and the old middle class—especially small business—from which Carter can expect little support. In effect, this blueprint was urged by the single most important internal political document of the Carter administration ever to reach the public. In May, 1977, the press carried reports of a major memo that Patrick Caddell sent the president, showing him how to "win big" in 1980. Caddell, Carter's own pollster, was quoted as stating that Carter has "an opportunity to co-opt many of [the Republicans'] issues and to take away large chunks of their normal [vote] by the right actions in government." Caddell is further quoted as having identified the prime sociopolitical targets as the college-educated, professional and white-collar workers, adding: "This is the largest rising group in the population. It must be attracted in significant numbers if Democrats are to be successful in the future."

It would serve well for a president who was elected by a narrow margin to widen his base of support, recognizing that the Democrats should appeal to growing groups, adding them to the natural Democratic constituency—which is presently on the decline. (There

are proportionally fewer blue-collar workers, and more white-collar employees and professionals, in contemporary America than there were 20 years ago. Similarly, there are many more college-educated and suburbanites, and fewer less-educated and inner-city people—who are the traditional Democrats.) But the president cannot wait until 1980 to court these voters. They will judge the Carter record established during the between-election years—a record that requires their mobilized support now if special interests are not to fashion it to their liking.

The issues that appeal to many in both the Democratic base and the new middle class, but not necessarily to big or small businesses, are of two broad categories. First are the post-Watergate reforms of the type championed by Common Cause. These involve opening up and cleaning up the government process by "sunshine" steps, such as requiring congressional committees to hold open meetings and making officials register all lobbyists who call upon them; "sunset" for many federal regulations and programs (if not explicitly renewed, they would expire at a given date); publication of taxpayer costs for each existing loophole; and so on. Since the Lance affair, the Carter people seem to shy away from such reforms, afraid that keeping a high moral note will be held against them if more of their staff are caught with dirt under their fingernails. Instead, if they would openly acknowledge that people are not perfect and hence institutional safeguards must be improved, they would have less to fear from future "Lances."

The second kind of "compatible" issues are those that concern environmental protection and that have limited inflationary consequences and cost relatively few jobs (such as doing away with billboards and testing new chemicals for toxicity rather than full pollution control of sulphur-rich coal) and, above all, fight inflation that eats into pensions and savings and nullifies most wage and salary raises. Of course, a full agenda for such a progressive coalition cannot evolve here; it has to arise out of the coalition building process. But it can be stated quite safely that without it, Carter will continue to fumble. He may gain some power in public opinion polls and get a few bills through Congress; but he will have no substantial record of achievements to run on in 1980. This will not be just Carter's loss, but a situation no one concerned with the public interest will welcome. **HB**

