

Jimmy Carter's Cold War Transition from a 'Lamb' to a 'Lion'

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Was Jimmy Carter's transition from a 'lamb' in 1976 to a 'lion' in 1980 symbolic of the constraints of the Cold War on US policymakers?

Jimmy Carter was elected to presidency in 1976 with two major foreign policy goals: restrictions on arms transfers, and the promotion of greater international human rights. Within the context of the Cold War, and the policies of his predecessors, Carter's goals were novel. However, following the civil unrest caused by US involvement in Vietnam, policies that favoured humanitarian gains were becoming more popular with citizens throughout the western world. Americans had witnessed, in Vietnam, the cost of Cold War containment; leading many of them to view the policy as 'not saving America but destroying it.' (Ambrose and Brinkley, 2011, p.217). As Carter himself said in 1976: 'The days of "Nixon Shocks" and "Kissinger Surprises" must end.' (Carter, 1976). Although Carter's intentions in 1976 were to promote diplomacy with the Soviets, and to encourage human rights and arms control throughout the world; by 1980 he had transitioned significantly in his foreign policy rhetoric – he had entered like a 'lamb' and left like a 'lion'. (Aranoff, 2006, p.425). In the following essay, I argue that Jimmy Carter's transition was both symbolic of the constraints of the Cold War, and a consequence of his inexperience with foreign policy in general. During his presidency he was faced with multiple crises that illuminated his inexperience, and allowed for his National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski to impart his own, more hard-line, opinions. Through analysis of key events, evidenced with primary source materials, I will show that Carter's relatively weak foreign policy was inevitably doomed to fail under the immense pressures to contain Soviet expansionism.

At the beginning of 1976, Carter's rhetoric with regards to human rights was condemning of repressive regimes: 'We should support the humanitarian aspirations of the world's people. Policies that strengthen dictators or create refugees, policies that prolong suffering or postpone racial justice, weaken that authority.' (Carter, 1976). In Presidential Directive 30, Carter made clear that 'countries with a poor or deteriorating record will receive less favourable consideration'. (PD-30, 1978). However, Carter developed and maintained a close personal relationship with the Shah of Iran – an authoritarian leader renowned for his human rights violations. Despite the Shah having initially been worried that Carter's presidency would prove disadvantageous to him, 'Iran did not seem to be a priority for the new Administration.' (Trenta, 2013, p.479).

With regards to policies of arms control, Carter took a similar stance with the Shah. In Presidential Directive 13, arms transfers were referred to as an 'exceptional foreign policy implement' and plans were laid out to lower the ceiling of total sales each fiscal year (PD -13, 1977). However, following the controversial agreed sale of advanced weapons systems to the Shah, it was clear that 'Carter's general predilection towards arms control was overruled in the case of Iran.' (McGlinchey and Murray, 2015, p.3). Within Carter's first year of promoting human rights and arms control, he had befriended an internationally condemned authoritarian leader; and sold him a record number of weapons.

This glaring inconsistency, between Carter's policy and actions, was a result of the strategic relationship that had been growing between the US and Iran since 1953. Iran's geopolitical location was vital to the US in securing the Middle East from perceived Soviet expansionism, and the Shah was an ally that US policymakers wished to keep happy. In a memorandum to the President before first meeting the Shah, Cyrus Vance stated the objective: 'to

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persuade him of your commitment to a continuation of the special relationship'. (Action Memorandum, 1977). Interestingly, human rights were not even mentioned in this memorandum. The evidence suggests that despite Carter's efforts to bring human rights to the fore of international politics, the Shah was too strategic a Cold War ally to risk pushing away. As McGlinchey and Murray (2015, p.5) note: 'Carter and his advisers knew they needed to maintain Iran as a strong ally in a tumultuous region'.

Carter's relationship with the Shah continued to develop, culminating in the infamous New Year's visit to Tehran, in which Carter toasted Iran as 'an island of stability', due to the Shah's leadership. (Carter, 1977). Despite opposition to the Shah's rule growing fiercely within Iran, the Carter administration continued to provide support to the regime, fuelling the anti-US feelings that were becoming more apparent. As SAVAK became more brutal in the repression of opposition demonstrators, 'Carter remained firm in his absolute loyalty to the Shah.' (Trenta, 2013, p.487). To this end, the US honoured their strategic relationship with the Shah until he was finally overthrown in 1979, which damaged any chance they may have had in building a relationship with the opposition, and effectively 'lost' them Iran.

The loss of Iran can be attributed to a serious shortfall in intelligence within the country. An intelligence report from 1978 suggests that violence in Iran was the most serious it had been in a decade, but was not 'an immediate threat to the Shahs regime'. (Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 1978). Since Carter had first taken office, he had repeatedly been assured that Iran was a stable ally, a 'status quo power which values peace and stability above all in the region'. (Action Memorandum, 1977). This short-sightedness was not simply a blunder made by intelligence representatives, but it was a direct symptom of the short-sightedness within Iran that the Cold War had created. CIA operatives within Iran were mostly concerned with the geopolitical location of the country, and the access this provided to the Soviets, rather than any domestic disturbances. Internal personnel distanced themselves from Iranian culture, and predominantly lived in western, English-speaking communities. This, coupled with the administrations trust of the Shah to report on his own country, led to the 1979 revolution taking Carter by surprise. As Trenta (2013) notes; intelligence collected focused mainly on communist threats to the country, and generally maintained that the Shah had a tight grip on the throne.

This grave intelligence oversight set in motion the chain of events eventually leading to the capture of ninety staff members from within the American Embassy in Tehran, by Iranian militants. The administrations continued support of the Shah, and failure to recognise the legitimacy of opposition groups, angered a majority of Iranians; exacerbating poor relationships and resulting in the terrorist action. The severity, and length, of the hostage crisis proved a huge problem for Jimmy Carter in maintaining a moralistic and non-interventionist stance as Carter lacked the foreign policy experience of many of his predecessors. As Aranoff (2006, p.430) notes: 'none of Carter's prior experiences as a naval officer, peanut farmer, state legislator, or governor lent themselves to establishing strong foreign policy convictions.' Although the administration initially attempted to solve the crisis through peaceful means, the approval Carter gave to the attempted military rescue of the hostages has been described by Houghton (2001, p.9) as 'deeply uncharacteristic.'

An even greater shock came to Carter when, in 1980, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. This was met with great hostility within the administration, and specifically with Carter himself who condemned the Soviet troops 'attempting to subjugate the fiercely independent and deeply religious people of Afghanistan.' (Jimmy Carter, 1980). In 1977, Carter had written to Brezhnev, stating: 'I have read your public remarks with great interest, and they encourage me to believe that we share a common desire to enhance and preserve the prospect of lasting peace.' (Letter to Brezhnev, 1977) During the first year of his presidency, he was optimistic with regards to relations with the Soviets, and believed vehemently that negotiations could be made peacefully. As the Soviet invasion unfolded, and the hostage crisis showed no sign of ending, Carter – ill equipped with foreign policy knowledge – was forced to turn to his most hawkish National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski.

At this point, the constraints of the Cold War had left Jimmy Carter with less of the idealistic optimism that he had once possessed, and he became far more susceptible to the views of Brzezinski, who had always taken a realist position in his views towards Soviet expansionism. As events in Afghanistan forced the President to rethink his foreign policy objectives, 'Brzezinski reinforced Carter's growing scepticism, and Carter, in turn, increasingly relied on the NSC as he adopted a more hard-line stance.' (Aranoff, 2006, p.442). In a memorandum to the President

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regarding the invasion, Brzezinski advised the President in taking a hard stance against the Soviets, and in particular altering the agreement not to sell arms to China. Instead, 'not to sell offensive arms to China', to allow for defensive radar systems to be placed on the border to combat Soviet moves. Brzezinski goes on to say: 'given the scale and the boldness of the Soviet move, these reactions are both needed and hardly excessive.' (Memorandum, 1980).

Brzezinski's growing cold warrior influence, coupled with Carter's anger at the Soviets actions, accounted greatly for the sharp change in Carter's rhetoric. In a 1980 State of the Union Address to members of Congress, which formed the new 'Carter Doctrine', the President stated clearly that attempts to gain control of the Persian Gulf area would be considered a direct threat to US interest, and would be met, if necessary, with military force. He made the claim that 'The Soviet Union must pay a concrete price for their aggression.' (Jimmy Carter, 1980). This was a stark contrast to the views expressed earlier in his presidency, evidence that the invasion had given Brzezinski the ammunition he needed to gain control of Carter's foreign policy. 'Carter had already undergone a gradual shift in attitude due to previous developments, but the invasion of Afghanistan was the final catalyst that ended his attempts at cooperation.' (Aranoff, 2006, p.444). Carter's moral and idealistic foreign policies had eventually faltered under the realities of Cold War power struggles, forcing him to rethink his strategies, and to adopt policies more reminiscent of those of his predecessors.

In order to conclude my argument, I will bring together the points made in this essay, and answer the question using each of them. To begin with, the strategic importance of Iran, and the allegiance with the Shah, led to Carter's first policy inconsistency. The relationship that had been built following the 1953 coup was of great importance to the US with regards to halting Soviet expansionism in the Middle East. In order to remain a close ally of the Shahs, and therefore to protect US interests in the Gulf, Carter was forced to contradict his own policies laid out in Presidential Directives 13 and 30. At this junction, Cold War containment proved to be far more important than Carter's own idealistic goals.

Preoccupation with Soviet expansionism resulted in devastating oversights made by the CIA personnel in Iran. While opposition movements were growing outside of the embassy, intelligence reports were focusing on minor threats from communism within the region, and failing to recognise the increasing lack of power the Shah had in his country. The obsession with gaining insight into Soviet movements meant that the intelligence community did not predict, and then take seriously, the severity of conditions leading up to the revolution. The administrations continued support of the Shah exacerbated bad relations between the US and Iran, which ironically led to the US losing Iran as a Cold War ally.

The hostage crisis was a result of ongoing US support and sponsorship of the Shah's repressive regime; but was nonetheless a terrible blow to the administration. It was during this crisis that Carter's lack of foreign policy experience became more evident, as he struggled to maintain a moralistic and non-interventionist stance. In giving approval to the failed military rescue operation, Carter showed a weakness and an inconsistency in his foreign policy. Also, Carter's complete shock at the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan led him to be swayed in his actions by the hard-line Brzezinski. With an already weak foreign policy, Brzezinski was able to influence Carter to change his rhetoric, and to become more of a Cold Warrior – evidence of which is in the speech Carter made in 1980, leading to the 'Carter Doctrine'.

By this point, Carter had made his transition from 'lamb' to 'lion'; the result of an inexperienced President, with weak foreign policy that was incredibly susceptible to change under the influence of Cold War power struggles. 'Because Carter was confronted with the intractable realities of power, he ultimately returned to the foreign policy of his predecessors.' (Kraig, 2002, p.10). In the end, Carter's policies became a reaction to events that happened to him, rather than a policy that was pre-designed to deal with such events. To this end, his transition was very much symbolic of the constraints that the Cold War had on US policymakers; Carter's morals, ideals and optimism only served to make these constraints all the more evident in his case.

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