
EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

President Jimmy Carter

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On May 18, 2007, I interviewed President Jimmy Carter in his office in the Carter Center in Atlanta. The thirty-ninth president granted me an unusually long interview, excerpts from which are printed here.

GE: Mr. President, first, let me thank you for meeting with me today. I know that devoting an hour to an interview is unusual. I am honored to have this opportunity, and our readers will be most grateful for your insights.

The first question I have is a broad one. I do not have to tell you that there are great differences among the contexts of presidencies in such fundamental aspects of politics as the state of the economy, the party alignment in Congress, or the issues on the agenda. Richard Neustadt once commented that it was silly that so many people in 1977 were using the LBJ analogy of 1965 to think about your presidency. From your perspective as president, how did the context of your presidency affect you as you set out to govern?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I had been governor when Nixon was in office and part of the time when Johnson was there. I campaigned for a long time, throughout 1975 and up until November 1976, in all fifty states. I had intimate contacts with different constituencies, beginning with just tiny groups and building as I gained popularity and fame. I had a very good opportunity to learn from my choice of the most respected analysts or thinkers on the political scene, primarily those who related to the Democratic party. I would bring busloads of key people down to Plains after I won the nomination, and after I won the election, to give me intense briefings all day long, maybe forty or fifty people at a time, on the economy, on the Panama Canal issue, on the Middle East, or on relationships with Russia and China—whatever I wanted.

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So I was thoroughly familiar with the issues when I finally was inaugurated. Before that, I worked very intimately with Dr. Brzezinski in outlining roughly ten major goals that I wanted to accomplish while I was in the White House.

I was minimally affected by what Johnson had done or Kennedy had done, although I was aware of it. My hero among my predecessors was Harry Truman. I thought he epitomized what I wanted to be as a president. I was heavily affected by his ordaining an end to racial segregation in the military, years before Rosa Parks sat in the front row of the bus or Martin Luther King was known.

Maybe I was overly confident when I was inaugurated about what I could do. I recognize that my positions were somewhat of an anomaly in that I was not compatible with the Kennedy regime, the liberal wing of the party. I was not compatible with the Richard Russell and Walter George constituency in the South. I was very progressive on social issues and very conservative on balancing the budget and on a strong military. That created a quandary in the assessments by news reporters and columnists and, I guess, by many of the people with whom I had to work in Congress.

I deliberately chose Walter Mondale to be my running mate because he and I were compatible personally, but also because I wanted somebody that was younger and progressive and was familiar with the congressional scene. Hubert Humphrey was kind of a hero of mine as well, so that is why I went ultimately toward Walter Mondale.

I had a pretty clear concept of what I wanted to accomplish when I went to the White House. I heard a cacophony of voices in dealing with some of the major issues that I would face. Energy, for instance, was one. I had been immersed in education matters before I got into politics when I was a state senator, and when I was governor. I saw the need, for instance, to create new departments for Energy and Education. I brought them together, I think thirty-three agencies into Energy—I cannot remember exactly, and I made Education a separate entity.

I was taken aback in my first few days in the White House. I could not get a single Democrat to sponsor my legislation that I wanted for reorganizing the government, legislation that gave me authority to reorganize and then Congress authority to veto what I did. So I had to go to Republicans to introduce my first bill in the House of Representatives. I never considered myself, even in retrospect, to be reluctant to turn to the Republicans to help me, and that was pretty well established my first week in the White House.

Later, Ted Kennedy, who was my number one supporter on a percentage basis the first year I was in the White House, decided to replace me as the Democratic party's nominee, and he and Senator Byrd formed a coalition. From then on, I was faced with a schism that increasingly separated me from the liberal wing of the Democratic party. But I had strong support among Republicans, and Howard Baker turned out to be my key contact within the U.S. Senate.

What I inherited from my predecessors shaped my agenda. I can list four or five examples. One of them was the Panama Canal treaties which I saw as a potentially explosive factor in this entire hemisphere. In fact, the Group of 77, as you know, unanimously condemned the United States, and we lost a good relationship with Latin American countries. I was, I think naïvely, committed to consummating a new Panama Canal treaty.

The Mideast peace process was a religious commitment of mine. I had been to the Mideast as governor, and I felt that up until I took over that there had not been an effort for a comprehensive peace proposal, although Nixon and Kissinger had ended the 1973 war with cease-fires.

I had been in China when I was a young officer. I was fascinated with China, and I studied George Marshall's policies and that sort of thing. I went to China in 1949, the same year that the Nationalists left the mainland. I wanted to build on what Nixon had done. He said there was one China, but he never would say whether it was Taiwan or the mainland. Gerald Ford ignored the Chinese issue. Ronald Regan was attacking Ford from the right wing to put potential progress on China on hold. I was determined to normalize relations with China.

Federal energy policy had cast a blight on my governorship, which was during the time when members of OPEC had an embargo against our country and a secondary boycott against American corporations that traded with Israel. I saw that and thought it was a disgrace.

The environment issue was also important to me. When I became governor, I was faced with two major crises. One of them was the damming up the Flint River. There were two major dams that had been approved that were completely unnecessary and counterproductive, but they were sponsored by a very prominent congressman from Griffin, Georgia. The other one was the draining of wetlands. There were some 590 wetlands-draining proposals in process of being approved automatically when I became governor. I vetoed every one of them, and since then there has not been one approved in Georgia.

I was immersed in that issue. I saw the environment as a major challenge for me. I inherited the Alaska statehood legislation from Dwight Eisenhower, where for twenty years or so nobody had been willing to resolve the issue of land allotments in Alaska.

These issues inherited from my predecessors were long overdue for substantive treatment. I was not dismayed by them, but I was challenged to resolve them. I think going down that list in retrospect we basically resolved them all while I was in office. I think some of them have reemerged.

That puts it in context. Every president inherits unresolved issues. I think almost every one of mine in foreign affairs would go back either to the founding of Israel, or to the Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union, or to the first Panama Canal Treaty.

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GE: Now let me move to something more specific and that is relations with the public, certainly one of the primary presidential relations. You often asked the American public to face their problems squarely and sometimes to make sacrifices, like turning down heat to save on energy, and you spoke dramatically about a crisis of confidence. The same kinds of general principles seem relevant today, talking about funding Social Security in the long term, energy again, and environmental protection, for example. So I would like your view on how well can a president convince the public to face a potential crisis before it actually hits or does it take events to capture the public's attention and to educate it?

PRESIDENT CARTER: It takes both. Events can sometimes force a president to face a crisis that is already there and sometimes a cognizant president can anticipate a crisis and try to prepare the public for it or induce the public to help prepare for it by making some moderate sacrifices.

I think that in the case of energy it was more than just turning down the heat. There was a gamut of what I would guess were ten or twelve major issues that faced me concerning energy, and I think the first year I was in office I made four major speeches to the public on energy. Some of them fell on deaf ears, but eventually we got almost all that we wanted while I was in office, with more efficient motors, generators, refrigerators, stoves, automobiles, and house insulation.

The most difficult thing there, that I got by I think two votes, was the deregulation of the price of oil, which had been pegged at an extremely, abnormally low price. This was an issue that brought me in conflict with the oil companies, because we had windfall profit tax attached to it so the increase in price of oil could not result in their increased profits. At the same time, it was inevitably going to increase the price of gasoline and natural gas to consumers. We finally got that passed. I need not go into detail about what the deleterious effects of that excessively low price had been in the past, but it encouraged Americans to waste energy. If I remember right, we were importing about nine million barrels of oil per day. I thought that was a danger to us, because it permitted the oil suppliers to intercede not only in our international affairs but also in our domestic affairs, as had been demonstrated by the secondary boycotts against American corporations—which we outlawed by the way. Over a period of five or six years, a couple of years into the Reagan administration, we went from nine million down to five million. We are back up to twelve million now.

That was an important issue for me, and a very difficult one. I never was successful in convincing the American public that they should join in with me wholeheartedly. Although we lowered the speed limit to fifty miles an hour, which was a big issue, particularly in places like Montana or Wyoming. And we built upon a law that was passed under Ford to require automobiles to become more efficient, which was undone by Reagan. We set as a goal 20 percent renewable energy sources—solar, wind power—and I do not need to go into detail about that. Within five years we increased renewable energy sources from I think about 6 percent when I was in office up to 9 percent. Now it is back down to about 6 percent, but we wanted to go to 20 percent.

Those are major goals. One thing that made it difficult for me and for my image was that we set very high publicized standards for what I wanted to have, say 100 percent. We would have an intense debate with Congress on a bipartisan basis. We would get 75 percent of what we wanted, which is 75 percent more than we had to start with, but the image was that we lost 25 percent. I am not complaining about that, but that is a truism of politics.

I do not think there is any doubt that a president can expedite the public's view to avoid a crisis if he is wise and willing to take a chance, but sometimes his best efforts are fruitless.

GE: Let me ask a follow-up on that. Presidents, of course, spend a lot of time trying to convince the public to support their policies, themselves, or both. They often fail. Under what conditions is a president most likely to be able to move public opinion?

PRESIDENT CARTER: It is when evidence external from the White House corroborates what the president's message is. When that does occur, then of course the president's message can be more effective. In 1979, we had a repetition of gas lines at pumps, particularly when Iraq invaded Iran, and you might say we lost all the exported oil from those two major oil suppliers. So I think that helped me get the final stages, not 100 percent, of what we attempted to do in the energy legislation. So that was evidence that corroborated what I was saying.

A "moral equivalent of war" may have been an excessive statement. I derived that from my mentor, Admiral Hyman Rickover, who referred to the energy crisis in those terms. I was influenced heavily by Rickover. After I left the submarine force, in most years Rickover would write a treatise on something, I would say maybe twenty or thirty pages double-spaced, and he would send it to his officers and former officers. He wrote a treatise once of the energy issue while I was still governor. He made it so that I could understand it for the first time. Instead of saying a quadrillion BTUs or hundreds of millions of barrels of oil, he described the oil reserves in cubic miles. Plains is a circle a half a mile in diameter, and I could envision Plains being a mile deep in oil. Anybody can envision what a cubic mile is. At that time the total world reserves were about twenty-one cubic miles, and we were using up so many cubic miles a year. So he explained that to me.

But anyway, I got the "moral equivalent of war" from Rickover, and the issue obsessed me. It took up more of my time, more of my energy, and more of my access to the news media, more of my speech efforts than any other issue during my entire administration.

GE: That is fascinating. Let me ask you one other thing about a president's relations with the public, and that is about your election in 1976. The results were pretty close. As far as Congress's responsiveness to you or your own assessment of whether you had a mandate, did it matter that your margin of victory was small?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I don't believe the closeness affected me. I have seen some statements lately that I am the only Democratic candidate since Johnson who actually received a majority of the votes.

This is a brief recapitulation. When I first got the nomination and Ford got the nomination, the Republican party was deeply split between Ford and Reagan, and a lot of the Republicans in the public opinion polls said they were not going to vote for Ford. So it made my margin of preference greatly exaggerated, I would say at least 15 percent when I got the nomination. We saw that. I did, and Hamilton Jordan did. All of us saw that as an exaggerated lead over Ford. And then as the time for the election approached, those Republican Reagan votes all went to Ford, which was predictable.

I won by a very small margin, but I never was constrained by the fear that I did not have a mandate.

GE: Did your margin of victory affect Congress at all?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I don't really know. The greatest incompatibility I had during the campaign was with the Democratic party. The Democratic party was never mine, and

I accept a major part of the responsibility. I was doing great in public opinion polls, as a peanut farmer coming out of Georgia, as a nonlawyer, as one who had not been involved in Vietnam and Watergate. Then, when I actually got the nomination, I was saddled with the full responsibility for every Democratic candidate in America as a running mate. The more unattractive they were or the more obnoxious they were, the more they clung to me in my popularity to help them. It dragged me down. I am not complaining about that, that is part of life.

Even during the next four years, I was never able to consolidate support in the Democratic party, particularly after Kennedy decided to run for president. I think he sapped away about 5 or 6 percent of my votes in 1980.

I don't think that the narrowness of my victory over Ford adversely affected my relationship with the Congress. As a matter of fact, I have seen the *Congressional Quarterly* assessments, and in essence we had as good a batting average as Johnson or Kennedy as far as my proposals and the percentage being approved by the Congress.

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GE: I would like to move on to what is probably the core function of the president, which is making decisions. We often do not think about decision making *qua* decision making. We think about the individual decisions instead. Yet the style and process of decision making comes back to haunt us time and time again when bad decisions are made.

So I want to start with what I call details and decisions and a basic quandary of presidents. On the one hand, they are to set a broad vision for the country and for their administration. On the other hand, they need to reach down for tangible details of policy options so they understand them and can make wise decisions.

You are known for your mastery of complex policy, and you are interested in the details of policy as a good policy analyst. Other presidents have been less interested in details. So let me ask you into how much detail should a president delve in making decisions?

PRESIDENT CARTER: All of my answers are subjective, of course. I feel that in retrospect, and I also felt at the time, that we set strategic goals before I got to the White House. You can look at a speech I made at the Woodrow Wilson Center where I outlined ten things that I wanted to do in foreign policy—Mideast peace, Panama Canal treaties, normalize relations with China, for example. That is what I considered to be the strategic thinking. I won't go into domestic issues to save time. As time went on, I modified that list with changing circumstances and unanticipated challenges like the taking of hostages.

I really relished the strategic planning sessions that I had with Brzezinski every morning and habitually, without deviation, with my key advisors every Friday morning for an hour and a half. This is something I tried to get Clinton to do, but he never would. I had my national security adviser, the secretary of defense, the secretary of state, the vice president, and usually Hamilton Jordan and Jody Powell. Brzezinski was kind of a secretary. They would bring every issue that we were facing at that time or might come up on their distant horizons as a challenge. We discussed it in an open hour-and-a-half-long breakfast in the Cabinet Room.

I would listen to all of those disparate voices, particularly differences such as those between Cy Vance and Brzezinski, and I would make a decision, and Brzezinski would write down my decision. Sometimes I would postpone a decision until the following week, but that would be kind of a maximum.

On Wednesday at noon Brzezinski, the secretary of defense, and the secretary of state would meet, and Brzezinski would assess how they were coming in carrying out my decisions. They would also prepare the agenda for the next Friday. We did that every week.

So on the big things, the strategic plans, I had a cacophony of voices before me, and I would make the decisions.

Brzezinski was my best advisor, not State. When I needed innovative ideas, State was practically worthless. I say this in my book, *Keeping Faith*.

Regarding the details, I am still an engineer by thought. You know, when I run my farm or when I run the Carter Center, I want to know what is going on. When I took on the personal responsibility, say for the Mideast peace process, I really believed that when we went to Camp David I knew more about the details than anybody there. I had mastered the psychological and historical analysis of Begin and Sadat. I knew everything they had done since they were born that was recorded, how they had reacted to crisis, how they dealt with pressure, who their allies were, and what their obligations were. So when we got to Camp David, I knew them, and I knew the map of the West Bank and Gaza.

The first day or two when I negotiated with Begin and Sadat, Vance stayed in the little room and took notes, but later, after three days, Begin and Sadat were so incompatible that I kept them apart. They never saw each other for the last ten days. So I went back and forth. And I knew the issues, and I knew what I wanted.

I did basically the same thing with the Alaska Lands bill. I knew the map of Alaska in great detail.

I read a lot. I would say I read an average of 300 pages a day. That is just something that I quantified years ago, so I am not just talking casually. I took a speed-reading course. I did, and about fifty other people did, from Evelyn Wood in the Cabinet Room within the first two months of my term. So I could read a lot.

So, I studied those issues. In general, however, I limited the issues on which I was acquainted with the details to ones where I felt that I personally had to do the negotiating. I thought then, as I say this is a subjective analysis, that the major strategic concepts and goals that I wanted to set for myself were generically derived. But on a few issues I was very, highly informed personally.

GE: So it was particularly important to get into the great detail when you were personally negotiating?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Absolutely.

GE: That makes sense.

PRESIDENT CARTER: The most difficult issue I ever faced in my life, politically speaking, was the Senate ratification of the Panama Canal treaties. In the fall of 1976,

forty-eight senators introduced a resolution in the Congress pledging not to approve any change in the Panama Canal treaties. I had to get sixty-seven affirmative votes. I called in senators to talk about the treaty, and each senator who was in opposition would have selected one particular sentence or paragraph in the Panama Canal treaties as written as their focal point for objection. They may have talked about that back in Nebraska or wherever. So I had to know the details of the Panama Canal treaties in order to sit down across from them in the Oval Office and try to convince them that their concerns were ill founded. It would have been much less effective if I would have had my secretary of state or Brzezinski present and turned to Brzezinski and asked him about a paragraph they were talking about.

GE: So you do not see any trade-off between vision and detail?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I do not think there is an incompatibility. The visions are the generic things, and you can give all of your subordinates the responsibility to carry those out. But there are a few things on which a president has got to be the key person.

I would presume that when Reagan was in office—I do not know this—that the senators or congressmen that he was trying to convince would come into the Oval Office and probably did not expect Reagan to know the details. It would have been more natural for him to turn to his secretary of defense, or state, or national security adviser to talk about details. We were just different persons. I am not criticizing him.

GE: I have a related question about delegation. There are many decisions that are made in government, and the president cannot make all of them. Sometimes presidents want to locate decisions in the White House, and sometimes they want to give lower officials discretion to make them—and they have to do that to some degree. When were you most comfortable in delegating decisions to subordinates?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I would say in domestic affairs I was most comfortable, because I had Stu Eisenstein in charge of my legislative drafting and domestic staff. If I wanted to prepare a proposal to the Congress concerning energy or the environment or welfare or health or education, I would just write a memo to Stu or talk to Stu and say this is what I want to do, and they would put together the detailed legislative proposals, and I would be perfectly at ease with that.

David Rubenstein was his assistant. He went on to become a great success and is now listed in the Forbes 400. But I never saw David much. He was always in the background.

Stu had been an issue analyst when Hubert Humphrey ran for president in 1968. He was from Georgia, and he was my issue analyst when I was campaigning. I was perfectly confident that when Stu and his staff came forward with a legislative proposal, it would comply with my overall instructions. So I did not need to study all the details to make sure they got it right.

GE: Very interesting. Now I would like to ask about another quandary. Leaders in every country and time period often become prisoners of their premises—and on the most

significant matters—and make major mistakes. Prominent examples include the U.S. before Pearl Harbor and the North Korean invasion of South Korea in 1950, Mao and famine in China, Hitler and the fortitude of the Soviet Union, the French General Staff regarding the German strategy in both World War I and II—the list is endless. Every president comes into office with premises, views about the world and how it works and about policy. Every president has been thinking about these things for many years before arriving at the White House.

At the same time, commentators often argue that to make good decisions it is crucial to keep an open mind, to push back on advisors' advice, and to challenge one's premises, because these premises may be wrong and need to be adjusted or refined. The goal is to increase the probability of avoiding mistakes such as those that appear to have been made on the premises of the war with Iraq and the subsequent occupation. So the question is whether there is any formula for avoiding becoming a prisoner of your premises.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Yes, I think there is a way. First of all, choose top advisors in the cabinet and the national security staff who bring knowledge, diversity of opinion, and basic philosophy. A typical example, I need not to go into detail, would be Brzezinski and Vance. Then you need to make sure that you give their often conflicting views a fair hearing. Roosevelt is assessed to have done this overtly. I did it overtly. The *Washington Post* pointed it out just about every day.

I had a family—this is a footnote—my wife and my three sons who were out in the country every day during the campaign. That is why I won. We never campaigned together a single day. I won the campaign in 1976 because every Monday morning my wife, I, Jack and his wife, Chip and his wife, Jeff and his wife, my mother, and my mother's sister, seven of us, would go out to different places in America. We never went to the same place. We would campaign as best we could.

Every Saturday we would meet back at my house in Plains. We would spend Saturday afternoon going over our experiences, what people were saying in Iowa and how did it differ from what people were saying in Massachusetts, about abortion for instance, and so forth. We made sure that we were preaching the same sermon. On Sunday afternoons, at first we went to very small rallies and then larger and larger ones as my popularity increased. We would go where Hamilton Jordan and his staff suggested that we go. Hamilton and Jody and Frank Moore and others got together and said we think that the governor ought to go to Iowa and Mrs. Carter ought to go to Florida and that sort of thing.

We did that every week. By the time the other candidates woke up, they had lost. It was not my sterling character or my eloquence that did it. Rosalyn spent 105 days in Florida, and she went to 115 different communities in Iowa, in addition to what I did. The people knew us, and we all were giving the same message.

When I was president, Rosalyn and other family members were still traveling all over the country, and they would bring back to the White House, around the supper table, those disparate views. I was getting them also from others. So the first thing for a president who wants to avoid a generic mistake is to have diversity of opinions before

making a decision. Then, it is important to be flexible enough to modify your preconceived ideas, which is not always easy, I admit.

I think that is one of the things that President Bush has not done. I am not criticizing him, but I think he has had almost a homogeneous cadre of people to whom he listened. I would guess that most other presidents have had more of an approach like I had.

So that would be a way, I think, to avoid being excessively committed to preconceived ideas.

GE: Another aspect of decision making, and another challenge for a president, is to get his advisors to tell him what he needs to hear as opposed to what they think he wants to hear. You are obviously a very intelligent person and you are a very competitive one, which is not unusual in presidents. Hamilton Jordan wrote in his memoirs that, if he wanted to change your mind on something that was important or complicated, he could not do it in person. He had to do it in writing, because as soon as he started talking, you would just overwhelm him with facts and analysis. So he never got to the second or the third point.

I merely add that anecdote for color, but the basic problem is every president faces a problem in ensuring that people tell him what he needs to hear and what they really think. We have plenty of examples of presidents who demeaned people who disagreed with them or closed out people who offered views they did not like or that were incompatible with their previous policy stances.

How did you make sure that you heard the full range of options? You mentioned earlier that you had open discussion on Friday mornings. So how did you make sure discussion was open so that people felt comfortable arguing with you or telling you things that you may not have thought at first?

PRESIDENT CARTER: The Friday morning example just applied to my national security advisers. But we had regular cabinet meetings, which were incisive discussions of issues that anybody wanted to bring up—concerning labor, or welfare, or housing, or the judiciary branch. We would go around the entire table, and I would encourage each secretary to tell me the most important things that affected their departments that we needed to discuss. I would presume that any of them that are still living would certify that I never restrained them from doing so. If the issue was complex and they required more than two or three minutes of exposition, I encouraged them to put it in writing and submit it to me. Those papers always came to me, and I relished that concise nature of their presentation. It required them to get their thoughts in order, and I was very much a stickler for not splitting infinitives and so forth.

And all of those papers are in the presidential library now. I think the scholars that have been over to the presidential library to look at my notes have been impressed, I started to say overwhelmed, with the meticulous detail with which I would answer sometimes each paragraph in a complex proposal—I approve this, I do not approve this, see me about this, or explain this, and so forth.

When I made a decision, I would expect everybody to comply or I gave everybody a chance for a reclama. Sometimes in domestic affairs or after the Friday morning

meetings, if everybody spoke, and then I made a decision, and say if Cy Vance did not approve, I would give Cy a chance to come back later and give me the reasons why he disagreed with my decision. Vance threatened to resign three times, and one time he resigned, because we had some basic differences of opinion.

That is what I did to make sure that I got a complex and quite often diverse set of opinions.

Now there were some issues where I went against the majority. An overwhelming majority of my advisors said do not go to Camp David with the expectations of a comprehensive settlement. Even more vociferous was their objection to my going to Cairo and Jerusalem to consummate the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. It was such a high-profile matter, that if I had failed, it would have been a devastating blow to my prestige and to the United States' prestige. But I went anyway.

Another example was the hostages being held in Iran. The vast majority of my advisors, including my most intimate ones, wanted me to take some military action against Iran. I could have done it, but I had a basic philosophy against the killing of innocent people. I felt, maybe more persuasively, that if I attacked Iran, they would very well assassinate all the hostages. I didn't know. So I refrained from that.

So that dragged the darn thing out for 444 days. If I had taken more incisive action, which I am sure George W. Bush would have done or maybe Bill Clinton, then it may have turned out differently.

But in most cases I went with the consensus.

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GE: I would like to turn to Congress. In 1977, as you well know, you were criticized for being principled, for taking principled actions, particularly about the water projects. I think you will agree that some members of Congress were irritated by your stands.

PRESIDENT CARTER: There is no doubt about that. That is putting it mildly.

GE: And critics claimed that you were wasting precious political capital on these matters. When it came time for your major initiatives, of which there were several, how much do you think that this irritation mattered in obtaining congressional support?

PRESIDENT CARTER: It is hard for me to quantify the loss of votes because of the water project issue. It was impossible then or now. I would say that my immediate staff in the White House agreed with me. It was a seminal change in the status of the Army Corps of Engineers that was long overdue. It was the right thing to do.

I am not talking about individual projects, but the system as it evolved over maybe a century or more before I became president. What happened was that a member of Congress would go to Washington, and he or she would have a dam project that they wanted to see in their district, to dam up a pristine river to make a lake and so forth, which could be very attractive. Then the member would put the project on the list, and if that congressman survived for 15, 20, 25, or 30 years, their project would move up to

the top and it would be automatically approved. The Corps of Engineers would deliberately falsify the cost versus benefit estimate to justify the project.

Well, those are the ones that I vetoed. I have to say that in good conscience, knowing what I knew and having been involved deeply in a major altercation in Georgia, which was precipitated by a lead article in *Reader's Digest* on the Flint River, I do not think I could have done differently. This is true even acknowledging the fact that I might lose certain votes from a congressman whose project I had vetoed. But how to quantify it, I don't know.

GE: In various interviews over the years, your aides have said that you really did not like to bargain with members of Congress. You liked figuring out what was the right thing to do and then proposing it or fighting for it rather than negotiating a compromise with Congress. In hindsight do you think that this orientation hindered your ability to obtain congressional support?

PRESIDENT CARTER: No, I don't think so. As I said earlier, this is a self-justification answer. If we could not get 100 percent and got 75 percent, what we bargained on was maybe that remaining 25 percent. But I would not bargain away a debilitating portion of what I wanted just to achieve an appearance of victory, which would have looked good maybe in the *Washington Post*—that Carter wins another victory. We never did—not to get a headline of that kind.

Even when we had major legislation adopted, the news media always emphasized the portions that I wanted that I did not get. So I can see that that may have in the long term been a deleterious impact on my political reputation or image.

I do not think I was excessively obdurate in my dealing with the Congress. I would guess that never in history has any president brought into the White House more members of Congress to listen to them and deal with them than I did. There were times when I brought in every member of the House, 100 at a time, into the East Room. They would sit in nice chairs, and I would get in front and I would explain, or Stu Eisenstein or someone else would brief them on a complex issue such as foreign aid or energy and try to convince them to go my way.

There were other times when I brought in one member of Congress at a time, as I did trying to get U.S. senators to vote for the Panama Canal treaties. When I had a senator, for instance, tell me privately, "I believe you are right on the Panama Canal Treaty, but I cannot support you because my people back home won't approve it," I would get a list of an average of 200 of his top fellow citizens—the owners of a TV station, the head of the VFW, college presidents, governors—and we would invite all of them to come to the White House. I and the key general in the Panama area and Brzezinski would give them a detailed briefing, and I would stay there for two hours answering their questions about the Panama Canal treaties. They would go back home and quite often the editorials in the paper would change.

That is how we finally prevailed. I dealt with the negative reaction to my proposals as best I could.

GE: That is very interesting. I did not have a good sense of that.

Let me ask a related question. Years ago you said in an interview that one of the problems in dealing with Congress was that you made a lot of controversial proposals that asked a lot of Congress, frequently calling for members to face up to long-postponed issues. You listed several such issues when we began talking about your agenda.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Yes.

GE: And you said there was nothing in a lot of these issues for members of Congress. They were issues with no political benefit and they often called for facing some limits. So my question, which represents a perennial challenge that confronts all presidents, is how do you overcome parochial interests when there are no political benefits for members of Congress but you have to face these issues on the agenda because they are important for the nation?

PRESIDENT CARTER: I think that the overwhelming majority of members of Congress, maybe all of them, possess a sometimes underestimated element of patriotism and a desire to do what is right for the country, even in the face of possible disapprobation at home. Some of them are highly idealistic and generous and willing to take a chance. Some of them have a very narrow ability.

I think that that is what the president has to tap. The president's ability to go to the local constituency directly, either through press conferences or through a visit to a state or bringing members to the White House, can help those reluctant members of Congress do what they may have already stated they knew was right for the country.

That is the best answer I can give to you. If you go down the list of things that we achieved, it is hard for me to identify any that were politically popular. I mean, just look at them.

In 1980, I was the first Democratic presidential candidate that did not receive an overwhelming Jewish vote, because Israel gave up the Sinai and I talked about the Palestinian homeland. The Panama Canal treaties were devastating to me and to the members of the Senate. As I wrote in my book, there were twenty senators that voted for the treaties up for reelection in 1978. Only seven out of twenty came back to the Senate. Two years later, there was almost an equal attrition rate, including Herman Talmadge here in Georgia. He lost his reelection although he had a sinecure. One of the major issues in the election was the Panama Canal treaties.

I think that those senators, including Russell Long and Herman Talmadge, voted for the Panama Canal treaties because they knew it was right. I think the general public underestimates the integrity, and the patriotism, and the political courage of the members of Congress.

GE: Mr. President, that is a wonderful, upbeat note on which to end. I thank you again for the opportunity to interview you.

PRESIDENT CARTER: I've enjoyed it. The hour has passed very rapidly.

GE: Yes, it just flew by.