

Crisis of Confidence: Jimmy Carter's Jeremiad

Jimmy Carter faced a perfect storm in the days leading up to July 15, 1979, when he delivered his "Crisis of Confidence" speech to the American people. The country, frustrated and upset by fuel shortages and hours waiting in line for gasoline, was roiling. The *Wall Street Journal* editorialized, "The social fabric of this society is stretched tauter than anytime in a decade" (Buffer 20). Reflecting this frustration, Carter's poll numbers had crashed. In the June 29 – July 2 rating period, 59 percent of Americans polled expressed disapproval of the job the president was doing and only 28 percent approved (Roper Center). Worse yet, the president appeared to have no sense of direction to provide to the nation. James Fallows, Carter's former speech writer, exposed this issue weeks before in a scathing *Atlantic Monthly* article saying, "Carter thinks in lists, not arguments; as long as items are there, their order does not matter, nor does the hierarchy among them. I came to think that Carter believes fifty things, but no one thing" (Fallows).

In the face of these pressures, Carter knew he had to address the American public and had scheduled a speech for July 5. His indecision about what to say, however, compelled him to change course, reset the speech for July 15, and convene a "domestic summit with ordinary citizens and leaders who could discuss the state of America" (Mattson 134). The 11-day summit was held at Camp David, one meeting of which included a group of religious leaders and scholars from around the country. Attending that meeting was Robert Bellah, a distinguished sociologist of religion from the University of California, Berkeley, who encouraged Carter to address the American public by revisiting the covenant language of the Puritans. Bellah had written on this subject and explained, "In the covenant model, people participate in each others' lives because they are mutually committed to values that transcend self-interest" (Mattson 143).

Shogan noted that Carter had a predisposition to go with “his version of ‘Old Faithful,’ the political sermon” and Bellah’s direction provided the path (72).

If Carter was in a perfect storm before “Crisis of Confidence” then he was on a giant roller coaster in the aftermath. Immediately following the speech, Carter’s approval ratings climbed 11 percent (Klein). Years later Carter would claim, “It was the most successful speech I’ve ever made. It had the largest viewing audience and the highest approbation of any speech I’ve ever made in my life” (Carter 63). Months after the speech, however, a *New York Times* editorial took an opposing view observing, “...there is no fun in Jimmy Carter. He has talked to us about malaise. He has uplifted practically no one” (Lewis). As if to bridge the gap between these opposing views, Carter’s pollster, Patrick Caddell recalled, “It was an incredibly successful speech, until he fired the Cabinet, which changed the whole tenor of things” (Collier).

These opposing evaluations beg the questions: Was the speech persuasive? Did it compel people to act or change attitudes? Is it possible that people agreed with the speech, but not with the message? In his book, *Influence, the Psychology of Persuasion*, Dr. Robert Cialdini has developed a model that allows us to examine these questions, see Carter’s text through the lens of persuasion, and evaluate it in a new way.

Cialdini asserts the primacy of six persuasion principles in communications. The first is reciprocation, a technique rooted in social norms. He stated, “The rule says that we should try to repay, in kind what another person has provided us. By virtue of the reciprocity rule...we are obligated to the future repayment of favors, gifts, invitations and the like” (17-18). The principle of liking, the second technique, states simply that, “we most prefer to say yes to the requests of someone we know and like” (167). Reciprocation and liking share a common objective in Cialdini’s model. Together, the two techniques are most effective at building relationship with

another party or an audience.

Following the building of relationship, Cialdini adds the principles of social proof and authority to his model. He defines social proof as, “one means we use to determine what is correct is to find out what other people think is correct. We view a behavior as more correct...to the degree we see others performing it” (116). This principle does not rely only on firsthand exposure to be effective. Simply believing that other people believe in a certain way through evidence provided by, for example opinion polls, opens the mind to persuasive argument. Authority speaks to the fact that, “We are trained from birth that obedience to proper authority is right and disobedience is wrong. Notions of submission and loyalty to legitimate rule are accorded much value...” (216). Cialdini argued that authority is an effective influence strategy because people tend to believe authority figures have superior access to information and power. Uniforms, specialized clothing (e.g. a doctor with a stethoscope), titles and displayed diplomas are a few ways the principle can be activated. These two principles work best “especially in ambiguous situations” (129) because their effect is to reduce an audience’s uncertainty.

The final two principles in the model are consistency and scarcity. At the essence of consistency is “our nearly obsessive desire to be, and to appear, consistent with what we have already done. Once we have made a choice or a stand, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave consistently with that commitment” (57). The scarcity principle operates on a different, more primitive plane in the human mind. Scarcity involves the idea of potential loss. People, Cialdini explained, “seem to be more motivated by the thought of losing something than by the thought of gaining something of equal value” (238). Dr. Cialdini put a fine point on this principle by stating, “should...established freedoms become less available, there will be an especially hot variety of hell to pay” (259). The common orientation that consistency

and scarcity share is that each works to motivate action. That, along with building relationship and reducing uncertainty, completes the model's outcome-oriented objectives.

One final but important feature of Cialdini's model is its sequence. To be fully effective, relationship is to be built before uncertainty is reduced which must occur prior to motivating an audience to act. The application of this model on "Crisis of Confidence" allows us to see how Carter missed three significant opportunities to persuade his audience, which, longitudinally speaking, is reflected in its negative reputation.

In the first stage of his speech, Carter's task was to build relationship and establish credibility. In the second sentence, he delivered a reciprocation message by saying, "I promised you a president who is not isolated from the people, who feels your pain, and who shares your dreams and who draws his strength and wisdom from you." While this was a good way to instantiate reciprocation, Carter fumbled the opportunity. Instead of explaining how he had fulfilled even a portion of his promise, he distanced himself from the audience by following with, "But over the years, the subjects of speeches, the talks, and the press conference have become increasingly narrow, focused more and more on what the isolated world of Washington thinks is important." Neither relationship-building principle – reciprocation or liking – has room to breathe inside these opening remarks. Carter failed to establish his credibility by ignoring a fundamental guideline of speechmaking, "Shake hands with your audience. Make the first step a quick step; get your smile, then get to work" (Safire 21). The self-flagellation continued just a few moments later as he read through a series of 19 quotes he had collected during the domestic summit. These included: "This from a southern governor: Mr. President, you are not leading this nation, you're just managing the government," and "Our neck is stretched over the fence and OPEC has a knife." Carter seemed determined to plunge himself onto that knife because he

finished this section of the speech saying, "...I've worked hard to put my campaign promises into law – and I have to admit, with just mixed success." Hahn explains, "It is an article of faith in Carter's religion that one cannot be saved until one's sins have been publicly confessed and repented" (584). Unfortunately, the reciprocal misstep, the listing of sins, and the confession make it nearly impossible to like him as a person or respect him as a president. As Renshon put it, Carter failed to "establish a realistic connection with the public" (228-9).

With the first persuasive objective missed, the question became whether or not Carter could successfully address the issue of uncertainty. He began by identifying what he believed to be the central issue facing the country:

The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.

Carter, ever the Sunday school teacher, then cut to the morality of that diagnosis, "...too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns." This is an important inflection point in the speech. It is in this moment where Carter shifted tone and where the address transformed into a jeremiad.

Instead of reducing uncertainty at this turn, Carter mounted his pulpit to complain to his audience about the lack of voter participation, declining worker productivity and a "growing disrespect for government and churches and for schools..." He then reflected on the national pain associated with the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He reminded the country of the dual shocks of Vietnam and Watergate, despaired about the

culture of Washington, and as if it were needed, he rhetorically wagged his finger at his audience by saying, “This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and is a warning.” Carter’s pathos had taken the speech to its nadir. He had stacked a cord of guilt-laden uncertainty into the arms of the audience. Rather than leverage the moment, Carter chose to “flail the profligate” (Hahn 586).

To his credit, Carter does attempt to make a positive turn by using three social proof references in his subsequent remarks. First, he asked, “What can we do?” Carter responded to his own question by pressing an opaque solution onto the audience: “We simply must have faith in each other, faith in our ability to govern ourselves, and faith in the future of this nation.” The use of the words “we” and “our” in these statements pegs them as loose forms of social proof. He then delivered an authority message by saying, “We ourselves are the same Americans who just ten years ago put a man on the moon” and “All the traditions of our past, all the lessons of our heritage, all the promises of our future point to another path, the path of common purpose and the restoration of American values. That path leads to true freedom for our nation and ourselves. We can take the first steps down that path as we begin to solve our energy problem.” From a strict review of the words, Carter did work in this stage of the speech to reduce uncertainty. His tone derailed the attempt, however. Carter sermonized, he did not encourage, and he passed by the opportunity to unburden his audience from the uncertainty he had created.

In the final stage of the speech and per Cialdini’s model, his objective was to motivate others to act. How did Carter respond? He unleashed his inner list maker and rattled off a lengthy series of actions he would take, including:

I will use my presidential authority to set import quotas.

I am asking for the most massive peacetime commitment of funds and resources in our nation's history to develop American's own alternative sources of fuel...

I propose creation of an energy security corporation...

I'm asking Congress to mandate...utility companies cut their massive use of oil...

I will urge Congress to create an energy mobilization board...

I'm proposing a bold conservation program...

Not only is this a missed opportunity, it also sheds light on yet another flaw. In total, Carter referenced himself in the speech with "I" 67 separate times but referred to the audience with the word "you" just 35 times. It is difficult to motivate others to act if the message they are hearing is not directed toward them. Advisor Daniel Bell explained to the president's pollster Patrick Caddell afterwards that Carter hadn't made clear what the next steps were and thus allowed others – especially the media who had labeled it the "malaise speech" in the days following its delivery – "to fill in interpretations of where the speech and the president hoped to go" (Mattson 166).

Carter did get more specific as he continued and invoked Cialdini's scarcity principle by enjoining the public to, "take no unnecessary trips, to use carpools or public transportation..., to obey the speed limit and to set your thermostats to save fuel." This was capped by a consistency plea and an additional scarcity message: "I tell you it is an act of patriotism;" and "There is simply no way to avoid sacrifice." In delivering these two lines, Carter undermined the motivational moment. As Shen explains, "messages with explicit conclusions show intention to persuade and may be perceived as more threatening to an individual's freedom" (24). This is a key observation. While people may have "found that the speech inspired them as it unfolded" (Stewart) and generally agreed with the words spoken, it is clear Carter failed to actually bring

the audience into an agreement, i.e. into a covenant. His multiple requests for the public to endure sacrifice followed by, “I do not promise a quick way out of our nation’s problems...”

likely triggered reactance and closed off the opportunity for the audience to receive his final, tepid entreaty, “Whenever you have a chance, say something good about our country.”

Unfortunately, Carter’s list-filled jeremiad modeled exactly the opposite behavior. He had very little good to say about the country and provided, therefore, a ready-made place for the malaise label to land and stick.

In her book *The Moral Rhetoric of American Presidents*, Colleen Shogun wrote, “Carter’s speech failed for two reasons. First, the substantive message...was incoherent and inconsistent. More importantly, the speech...failed because Carter attempted to use moral posturing to solve his political woes...at a time of...weakened legitimacy” (78). Seen from the opposition party’s perspective, however, the speech was a gift wrapped in a bow. Richard Wirthlin, then Ronald Reagan’s pollster remarked, “I remember the exact moment I knew Ronald Reagan could beat Jimmy Carter. The date was July 15, 1979” (35).

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