An Analysis and Evaluation of Jimmy Carter's
Presidential Primary Campaign

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Submitted in fulfillment
of the requirements for
ID 499

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May 17, 1976
A strange political phenomenon has occurred in America in the last five months. In that time a largely unknown Southern ex-Governor has propelled himself from almost nobody's first choice in January to the recognized front-runner and almost certain Democratic candidate for President. Jimmy Carter of Georgia is repeating George McGovern's 1972 sweep of the majority of the primaries without any of the apparent constraints McGovern suffered--such as narrow-based appeal and "extremist" viewpoints--which might hinder his chances in November. Because of Jimmy Carter's rapid success in the first half of the primary races for 1976 and because of his apparent wide appeal to the American people, I think his campaign and his story make up a significant area of concern and, thus, I intend to analyze and evaluate that effort in this research paper. We'll first consider his political background and campaign strategy for 1976. Then, we'll look at a brief rhetorical analysis of his speech announcing his candidacy for President and how Jimmy Carter views the issues in 1976, and finally, at how and why his success has continued in the primaries and an assessment of chances to win the nomination.

James E. Carter did not originally intend a career in government. He was graduated from Annapolis shortly after World War II and began working under then-Captain Hyman Rickover in the Navy's nuclear submarine program. But he returned home to Plains, Georgia in 1953 at the death of his father to take over the family's business and peanut farm.
So, he began in politics at home: First on the school board and next in the state Senate.\(^1\) He declared his opposition to segregation early in his career and that caused some tension among his local peers as he was the only white man in town to refuse to join the segregationist Citizens Council and his family alone voted to let blacks in the town Baptist congregation.

Following election to the state Senate, his political ambitions continued as he made an unsuccessful bid for Governor in 1966. He lost in the primary to Lester Maddox, but retained the desire for the job winning the next election in 1970. His record as Governor has been one of Carter's most useful campaign tools. He likes to portray himself as an expert administrator who could handle the job of running and re-organizing Washington's vast bureaucracy. As governor he consolidated the state's 300 agencies into 22 super-departments claiming to save the taxpayers $50 million and eliminating 2100 jobs.\(^2,3\) He says he will continue this same pattern of spendthriftiness if elected by reducing the more than 1900 "overlapping, uncoordinated and wasteful federal agencies."\(^4\)

Along with his art for governing, he maintained a desire for openness and cleanliness in government. He has released his tax returns for all the 18 years he has been in politics and, as Governor, won passage of a comprehensive "sunshine law" mandating that meetings in the executive and legislative branches be open to the public and press and that each state agency undergo performance auditing and issue public reports.\(^5\)

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2. Ibid. P. 29.
3. "Jimmy Carter: Why This Democrat Should Be Our Next President." campaign pamphlet of Jimmy Carter Presidential Campaign
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
He would like to try this same approach at the federal level. He says major officials should be required to reveal and drop all business and financial involvements that are a possible conflict with the public interest.6 He would also like to see a Parliament-type question period in Congress where Cabinet officials would be required to appear before Congressman and answer their questions. Jimmy Carter, thus, is hoping to convince the American people that he can make the same type of government work in Washington that he did in Atlanta.

Carter began formulating his plans to attain the Presidency early in his tenure as Georgia Governor. A few days after the 1972 Presidential election, he was presented with a 70-page memorandum laying out a blueprint for winning the '76 Democratic nomination. It was written mostly by Hamilton Jordan, then Gov. Carter's executive secretary and now his campaign director, and ever since has been faithfully followed by Carter and his campaign staff.7 Jordan wrote in 1972 that '76 should be a very good year for Jimmy Carter. As he saw it, domestic affairs would replace the Viet Nam war as the number one concern and people would be ready for strong moral leadership following four more years of Richard Nixon. Going for him, said Jordan, Carter had the "Kennedy smile" and the populism of George Wallace. But as his press consultant Jerry Rafshoon warned, "What he does not have is much depth to his image. It will take more than hand-shaking and the projection of 'I understand the problems of the average man' image to put Carter over...He will also have to convince press, public and politicians that he knows

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6. Ibid.
how to run a government." \(^8\) Thus, Carter's aides began mapping out general strategy objectives over the next four years. In 1973, Carter was to be "projected as the heaviest of the governors in accomplishments" and in 1974 as "a leader in the Democratic Party and someone involved with bringing it back." By 1975 he was to be a heavyweight thinker, leader in the party who had some ideas for running the country," and for 1976, of course, it was to be "Carter--a Presidential candidate." \(^9\)

The road from novice Southern governor to White House material was a long one, of course, and Jimmy Carter began immediately to prepare himself for it. He began reading more each day and learning the intricacies of Presidential affairs from such old hands as Dean Rusk. With his staff he began laying out his positions on the issues--about 40 of them from A to Z. It was also necessary that Carter become more familiar to the American people. So, his aides tried to help generate favorable stories and comments about him in the national press and Carter was to get to know some of the most influential reporters, editors and publishers. \(^10\)

Carter and Jordan also began thinking about how best to meet the primary elections that would be coming up in early '76. Jordan thought New Hampshire would be an excellent early opportunity as the people there would be likely to identify with and appreciate Carter's farmer, businessman, military, religious, conservative background. The Florida primary offered similar opportunities. Carter and his men have correc-

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8. Ibid.
10. Ibid. P. 29.
tly predicted that the Democratic National Convention this year will not be a brokered one taking several ballots to pick a nominee. They have also correctly predicted that the nomination is to be won or lost in the early primaries. Jordan thus urged Carter to press for a victory in a medium-sized state like Wisconsin and then pick a large, industrial Northern state where he could meet his major opposition and establish himself in the early going as a major candidate. "Pennsylvania or Ohio would do nicely," Hamilton Jordan said—as indeed the former did. Some of Jordan's most emphatic advice to Carter concerned the candidate's attitude toward the campaign and the office. He said Carter would have to adopt a learning posture as a candidate and not pretend to know all the answers, but rather to use his travels around the country as an opportunity to learn. He also encouraged Carter to repeat as President his gubernatorial vow not to compromise his principles to get elected. "Most men who seek this office are so consumed by their ambition that they will do anything to get elected. You have to attempt to separate yourself from this stereotype of the ambitious candidate who lacks commitment to anything, and establish yourself as a man of integrity." 

Jimmy Carter was, of course, still a full-time Governor and only part-time Presidential contender for the time between the formulation of this master plan in late 1972 and his formal announcement as a candidate on Dec. 12, 1974--more than two years later. During that time he took Ham Jordan's advice of increasing his political education

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
and cultivating influential friends. Shortly before the announcement of his candidacy, Carter and Jordan began making plans to go public with his campaign. In an August 1974 memo, Carter was urged to send letters to 14,000 "Georgia friends" and 15,000 "national friends." At this time, he also started thinking about the necessity of lining up some fund-raising possibilities for the campaign ahead.13

Jimmy Carter formally announced his candidacy for President before the National Press Club on Dec. 12, 1974. It was a short speech, but since it highlights at this early date the intentions of Carter in his campaign and his objectives, I think it is worthy of close examination. The text of Carter's announcement speech is curious in two respects: First, nowhere in the address does he specifically announce his candidacy; I must assume that he did so extemporaneously at the end of his prepared remarks. Second, he says nothing in this speech to try to encourage support for him personally. He mainly describes what he feels is wrong with America and the changes and goals he would like to see made. In this rhetorical criticism of Carter's speech, I will use the methodology outlined by Walter Fisher in his "A Motive View of Communication."14 Fisher sees a rhetorical situation in terms of a motive and says that a basic relationship exists between a speaker's perception of his problem and his response to that problem. A motive, he says, works to highlight the inter-relationship of communicator, message, audience, time and place. A motive situation, in turn, promotes

13. Ibid.
a particular kind of rhetorical response. Two of the motive situations outlined by Fisher would seem to apply to this analysis: The rhetoric of subversion, used to weaken or destroy a set of attitudes, and the rhetoric of re-affirmation, that is, techniques designed to re-kindle or emphasize beliefs already held by an audience.\textsuperscript{15}

Carter utilizes the rhetoric of subversion to knock down two targets: The Washington bureaucracy and the seamy pool of special interests that he says has infested and subverted the public interest for all these years, and the just-concluded Republican administration of Richard Nixon, which he charges with contributing to the Americans' distrust of government. For example, he charged, "Our commitment to these (great dreams of the American people) has been sapped by debilitating compromise, acceptance of mediocrity, subservience to special interests, and an absence of executive vision and direction."\textsuperscript{16} He tries to weaken his audience's opinion of how government has been operating recently by citing specific examples of failure: "What is our national policy for the production, acquisition, distribution or consumption of energy in times of shortage or doubtful supply? There is no policy! What are our long-range goals in health care, transportation, land use, economic development, waste disposal or housing? There are no goals!"\textsuperscript{17}

He then hits the American worker a little closer to home when he starts talking about the inequalities of the tax system. "When a bu-

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. P. 2
siness executive can charge a $50 luncheon on a tax return and a truck driver cannot deduct his $1.50 sandwich—when oil companies pay less than 5 per cent on their earnings while employees of the company pay at least three times this rate—when many pay no taxes on incomes of more than $100,000—then we need basic tax reform!"18

While Carter used the rhetoric of subversion to bring his audience's dissatisfaction with government to the surface, he next employed the rhetoric of re-affirmation to try to renew the people's faith in the American system and the ability of its people to solve our problems. His own faith is manifest: "I tell you that their dreams still live within the collective heart of this nation." 19 But he wants everyone to participate in the democratic process. "Every effort should be extended to encourage full voter participation by our people in their own governments' processes, including universal voter registration for elections."20 His message to the people is that good, decent, efficient government can work if the people want it to: "A government that is honest and competent, with clear purpose and strong leadership can work with the American people to meet the challenge of the present and the future."21 "We are equally capable of correcting our faults, overcoming difficulties, managing our own affairs and facing the future with justifiable confidence. I am convinced that among us 200 million Americans there is a willingness—even eagerness—to restore in our country what has been lost—if we have the understandable purposes and goals and a modicum of bold and inspired leadership. Our government

18. Ibid. P. 3.  
21. Ibid.
can express the highest common ideals of human beings—if we demand of it standards of excellence."\(^{22}\)

While Carter is re-affirming his trust in the American way and hoping his audience will do the same, he is also asking them to help in solving the problems and restoring our greatness. Help whom? Help Jimmy Carter as President, I think is implied. Without asking for the personal support of anyone Carter is simply asking everyone to join a team effort—a team of which he hopes to become captain. He effectively used the rhetoric of subversion to undermine people's faith in Republican presidents and to highlight their distrust of established government in Washington. He then followed up by presenting the rhetoric of re-affirmation to display his own support of the American system and to ask the people to join the grand effort to make things right again.

Carter chose to stop a step short of vocalizing the final link between his candidacy and all the things he thinks should be done for the country—probably a wise move, even though the inference was clear, since some people might have felt it presumptuous on his part to declare himself right at the start of his fledgling campaign that he was the White Knight whom everyone sought. My guess is that he preferred to state the issues and the goals on the one hand and his candidacy on the other, and allow the people to make that final deductive leap construing the two as one. Communications theorists will tell you that people generally believe more strongly in a decision or conclusion they have made them-

\(^{22}\) Ibid. Pp. 3-4.
selves rather than one somebody else has reached for them.

As was noted earlier, Carter and his staff began preparing his official positions on the issues at the earliest point in his campaign. At this point I think we should consider briefly exactly what his positions are on some of those major issues. The economy seems to be everyone's number one issue this year, although it may turn primarily into a Republican issue if things get much better. Carter says that the nation's single most important priority must be to find a job for everyone who wants to work.\(^2\text{3}\) He would try to achieve this by prompting private industry to hire the unemployed, retain workers during slow periods and provide flexible hours for working mothers through various federal subsidies and taxes. As a last ditch effort to put the unemployed to work, he wants the government to create meaningful public service jobs in their own neighborhoods. This might entail repair of railroads, completion of mass-transit systems, and caring for retarded children, alcoholics and drug addicts. To hold down inflation, Carter would closely monitor the prices of raw materials and recommend stand-by wage-price controls to be applied selectively by him. He wants the President to initiate long-range economic planning through three-year budgets. He says, "With a progressively managed economy, we can attain a balanced budget within the context of full employment by 1979."\(^2\text{4}\)

Carter sees tax reform as a matter of great urgency, also. He favors a vastly simplified tax system that eliminates most deductions and treats all personal income alike. He would also lower the tax rate

\(^2\text{3}\). \text{Newsweek. May 10, 1976. P. 36}
\(^2\text{4}\). \text{Ibid.}
for individuals and modify corporate taxes to discourage US businessmen from moving plants—and jobs—abroad. 25

In the area of foreign policy, Carter says he supports the idea behind détente, but feels it largely has been a one-way street so far in terms of benefits. He says our first priorities should be our Allies which he specifies to be Western Europe, Japan and Israel. He believes the legitimate interests of the Palestinians are going to have to be recognized, but a separate Palestinian state could only be recognized after the Arabs had assured Israel of its right to survive. 26 Carter says that arms sales to developing nations should be drastically reduced, and ultimately, all nations should abolish their nuclear stockpiles. He would cut the defense budget by $5–$8 billion and bring home most US servicemen stationed abroad. 27

From guns to butter—Carter says,

The United States of America is the greatest agricultural producer in the world. Yet, we now find ourselves in the ridiculous position of seeing the family farmer go broke trying to produce food and fiber the consumer cannot afford to buy.

We cannot expect the family farmer to continue to pay for the privilege of feeding the world. It is just as unreasonable to expect consumers to pay cheerfully for bureaucratic blunders and exorbitant middleman profits.

He wants a government policy directed toward a coherent, stable and predictable program of farming and production of food and fiber. He also wants a Secretary of Agriculture who would be more attuned to the needs of the farmer and consumer. 28

On bureaucracy and government inefficiency, Carter wants a drastic and thorough revision of the federal bureaucracy cutting down on waste—

26. Ibid. on Foreign Policy
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid. on Agriculture.
ful agencies and programs and introducing "tight business-like management and planning techniques." He writes, "There is no inherent conflict between careful planning, tight management and constant reassessment on the one hand and compassionate concern for the plight of the deprived and afflicted on the other. Waste and inefficiency never fed a hungry child, provided a job for a willing worker, or educated a deserving student." 29

Jimmy Carter has said repeatedly that he does not favor mandatory busing to achieve racial integration. He prefers a plan worked out in Atlanta while he was Governor involving much more freedom of choice for parents and children and ensuring more representative decision-making on the part of the community. 30

Government growth and budgeting was one of his main concerns as Governor of Georgia and it gets high priority on the national level as well. He wants the President to use zero-based budgeting—as he did in Atlanta—whereby each department theoretically has to justify each dollar it spends. The intent of such a system is to examine each year the need for specific programs and ensure the elimination of unneeded or obsolescent programs. 31

In the area of energy, Carter thinks the first priorities of a new national program to develop energy sources should be coal and solar power. He wants to reduce our "excessive emphasis" on atomic power.

29. Ibid. on Bureaucracy and Government Inefficiency.
30. Ibid. on Busing.
31. Ibid. on Government Growth and Budgeting.
Realizing that total energy "independence" is unlikely in this century, he wants to place heavy emphasis on conservation. 32

On other issues, he favors a program of national health insurance, a pardon for all Viet Nam draft evaders, and the death penalty for certain specified crimes. He believes abortion is wrong, wants to remove the Attorney General from politics, and cut the number of federal agencies from about 1900 to no more than 200. 33

Considering, then, Carter's stand on the issues as he sees them, let's look now at how well he has been able to get those messages across to the voters—in other words, how he has done in the primaries to date. New Hampshire was quite significant for Carter simply because he emerged first in a crowded field. Although his victory was generally expected in the final days of that campaign, Newsweek points out that it did impress some people simply because of the distance he has come in this race. 34 Carter won the New Hampshire race with 30 per cent of the vote. Morris Udall was second with 24 per cent and Birch Bayh third with 16 per cent. His strategy for the entire campaign—which obviously earned him the victory in the snows of New Hampshire—has been to start out early in the race, run fast and hard while the other candidates are still tying their shoes, and beat them on the basis of the strength of his advance organization and his growing recognition.

To illustrate how reliant he has been on his early firepower, he spent

33. Ibid. P. 36.
34. Newsweek. March 8, 1976
$2 million up through only the New Hampshire primary, which was the very first. 35

While his win in New Hampshire was impressive, his loss in Massachusetts the next week was every bit as frightening. He finished completely out of the money in that race because of a grave--and expensive--miscalculation. 36 He had considered Massachusetts a "media state" where he could go in and blitz the other candidates with heavy advertising instead of the crowds and handshakes that had worked so well for him in New Hampshire. He spent $105,000 on ads--more than any other candidate, as Jackson won and was hailed as the new front-runner. 37 Also that week he won easily in Vermont and fought George Wallace to a draw in South Carolina.

It was in the Florida primary March 9 that Carter seemed to knock Wallace out of the fight for all practical purposes. Carter beat Wallace only narrowly (34-31 per cent) but the loss in the South for Wallace was devastating, especially since he had won with 42 per cent in 1972. 38 The next week's race in Illinois, however, was probably even more important to Jimmy Carter. He again beat Wallace (this time 48-28%) and chased a couple of non-contenders--Sargent Shriver and Fred Harris--from the field. But more importantly, this dramatic victory in a major Northern state clarified the real race as between Carter, Jackson and Morris Udall, with Carter clearly the front-runner in delegates--and momentum. 39

35. Ibid. P. 30.
37. Ibid.
By this time in the primary race, Jimmy Carter was beginning to be known and liked by some of the rest of the country, too. A Gallup poll showed that Carter had pulled even with Hubert Humphrey as the party's top choice for the nomination and it also showed that Carter was the only Democrat who could beat Gerald Ford in a head-on race at that moment. The next week for Jimmy Carter was a bit of a breather. He faced Wallace again in North Carolina and won 54 per cent of the vote.

This third straight trounce of Wallace helped Jimmy Carter focus attention on the very important Wisconsin primary against Udall and the New York showdown with Jackson.

But New York did not prove to be the dumping ground for old, excess candidates as Carter was hoping. In fact, he finished a dismal fourth in New York's complicated delegate-selection process. This seemed to be a good week to forget for Jimmy Carter. Jackson won solidly in New York, Udall nearly upset him in Wisconsin (Carter won narrowly), the peanut farmer got a lot of hassle for his "ethnic purity" remark, and a stop-Carter movement behind Humphrey began to make itself visible.

Although the week did not produce as much as Carter would have liked, no one else did any better. Jackson won New York, but didn't run in Wisconsin, and Udall was second in both races. It seemed to be a week of holding steady.

Three weeks later brought what was called "Jimmy's Breakthrough" (Time,

40. Ibid.
May 10) and "Carter's Sweep" (Newsweek, May 10). In Pennsylvania he fairly destroyed the hopes of Jackson, who had campaigned all-out for the labor vote and lost to Carter, 37-25 per cent of the vote. A few days after, Jackson said he would no longer actively campaign for the Presidency. At the end of that week in Texas, May 1, Jimmy Carter severely trounced favorite-son Lloyd Bentsen, in part by asking the voters if they preferred someone who could be President or one who would simply horse-trade votes at a brokered convention in return for political favors. The week clearly belonged to Jimmy Carter--winning two big primaries, seeing his closest competitor, Jackson, drop out, while his most threatening almost-competitor, Humphrey, said he would not seek the nomination, and the Republicans plunged further in disarray as Reagan blitzed Ford in Texas. As Newsweek wrote, "Carter...stood only smiling distance from the Democratic nomination for President of the United States."

The final chapter of Carter's trek through the primaries to date is his "adequate" two out of three winning record in the Indiana, Georgia and Alabama primaries. He won his home state easily, as Wallace did his, but also won 68 per cent of the Indiana vote against Jackson and Wallace. At this point, the Carter campaign has shifted gears. Instead of running everywhere to win everything, Carter is spending more time talking with various Democratic officials and party-leaders hoping to endear the rest of the party to his campaign and unify it behind him to make his chances better in November. At this point, only knee-high hurdles stand between

Carter and the nomination: Frank Church in Nebraska on May 11, Udall in Michigan on May 18 and Jerry Brown in Maryland the same day. If he can skip over these without tripping too badly, his main concern should be to produce a unified party effort in New York in July.

Jimmy Carter's appeal in 1976 is quite clearly based on disassociating himself from the Washington "establishment" he feels has lost touch with the American people and consequently, is proving quite ineffective at solving their problems. But it is also based on a personal honesty, cleanliness and openness that he is quick to emphasize before he even begins talking about issues. It is this smiling openness that appears to have turned people on to him before anything else. The people are responding accordingly in almost every state to which he travels.

But, the people, of course, are not the only ones who make Presidents. Influential politicians and interest group leaders must be courted to ensure support in key areas and on important issues. This is what Carter has been doing the last few weeks. So far he has wooed such Democratic heavies as Party Chairman Robert Strauss, past-Party head Larry O'Brien, Richard Daley, New York Governor Hugh Carey and Missouri Senator Thomas Eagleton. He has also gone after AFL-CIO chief George Meany, who is non-committal at the moment. Carter has already won some important backing: Birch Bayh, Henry Ford II, Texas Governor Dolph Briscoe and Oklahoma Governor David Boren.

Jimmy Carter--farmer, businessman, nuclear engineer, Naval Academy

graduate, planner, student of international affairs, former governor—President? As Manhattan Borough President Percy Sutton recently said, "Most politicians deal with reality, and reality points toward Carter." 46

46. Ibid. P. 29.
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