

CARTER - REAGAN
CREATING IMAGES
AN ANALYSIS OF THE
OCTOBER, 1980 Presidential Debate
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From the President's standpoint, the greatest staff problem is that of maintaining his contact with the world's reality that lies outside the White House walls . . . the concept that "even your best friends won't tell you" about unpleasant things applies with tremendous force to the President.

- George E. Reedy,
former press secretary
to President Lyndon
Johnson, in his book,
The Twilight of the
Presidency

Martin Schram uses this quote in his book Running for President 1976 - The Carter Campaign to illustrate the main weakness of the Ford campaign in 1976. Four years later, the same statement could apply to the man who was victorious over Ford and who obviously fell victim to a disease that affected many of his predecessors:

Presidents get out of touch. They become isolated. They learn of the world's reality through the people who work for them, which is to say that they all too often don't learn of it at all . . . dissents are softened, harsh judgments modified, stinging phrases toned down; by the time view is presented to the President, it is not the view that the rest of the world is seeing. He has lost contact.¹

The essence of the failure of the whole Carter campaign was reflected in Carter's October 28 debate with Reagan. In

analyzing the rhetoric and the ideas expressed by both candidates in the debate, it can be seen that the concept of "creating a desirable image" is paramount in a political campaign. Simply asking Aristotle's famous question, "To what extent did the speaker use the available means of persuasion?" is hardly adequate in analyzing a communication situation such as a Presidential campaign. Certainly, Logos, Pathos and Ethos are of great importance in a debate, but should not necessarily be used as "a recipe book for critics, as states Professor Otis M. Walter in his essay "On the Varieties of Rhetorical Criticism."² Walter states that the results of the use of Aristotle's Rhetoric as the basis for speech criticism are largely sterile because the Rhetoric is often misused to provide only one aim (need I repeat the famous question?), which is not always the most appropriate, nor does it provide the most insight.³ Often a speaker may use ethical, logical, and pathetic proof to a large extent, yet not convince his audience that his ideas are the best for them. In most communication situations involving persuasion, the speaker create desirable images of himself and of his ideals, and that images correspond to those of his audience. As Walter Lippman states, "He who captures the symbols by which public feeling is for the moment contained, controls by that much the approaches to public policy."⁴ This aspect was a major downfall of President Jimmy Carter in his October, 1980 debate with Ronald Reagan.

Carter attempted to portray an image of a strong, capable, single leader in whom the public could put all of their trust to manage the affairs of the nation. However, this image was somehow distorted in the process of communication. Carter, instead of bringing himself close to the people to gain their trust, gave the impression of being an elitist. He set himself apart from the voters by stressing the point that he was "one man, alone, in the oval office." Although he made frequent attempts, he could no longer give the impression, as he did in his 1976 campaign, that he was "just a simple man, like every one of you." Instead, he aligned himself with past Presidents, placing an even wider gap between himself and the people of his country. Reagan, on the other hand, kept the focus off himself, and continued to associate his ideals and goals with those of the people.

Carter's first statement in the debate, which was a reply to a question about defense buildup, was very self-centered:

I've had to make thousands of decisions as President serving in the Oval Office. . . I'm a much wiser and more experienced man than I was four years ago when I debated Gerald Ford.

After making a short statement about military defense, he reiterated:

I might also add that there are decisions made in the Oval Office by every President which are profound in nature. There are troubled spots in the world. How those troubled areas are addressed by a President affects our nation directly. That is a basic decision that must be made by every President that serves. That's what I've tried to do.

Reagan, in response to the same question, used a more universal tone in his speech: "We must maintain peace . . . responsibility for preserving peace falls on us . . . America has never gotten into a war by letting things get out of hand . . . Good management in preserving peace requires that we control the events. . ." He never let the glory or the blame fall on himself or any individual, but instead, through the simple use of the first person plural, involved "us," the whole American people, in the decision-making process.

This type of rhetorical contrast, along with a contrast of ideals which reveals a misreading of the people's wishes on the President's part, continues throughout the debate. As Carter continues to alienate himself from the people and their viewpoints, Reagan reinforces the alienation with subtle accusations that "Jimmy Carter equals Big Government."

Reagan is in the position, of course, to more readily associate himself with "government that is closer to the people"-- state and local government--and disassociate himself with federal government, which he takes every advantage of doing during the debate: "Carter. . . has accused the people of living too well. We don't have inflation because the people have been living too well. We have inflation because the government has been living too well." Reagan later goes one step farther by asking

a rhetorical question which is conveniently placed in the format of the debate so that Carter cannot reply to it.

In the Question, Reagan replaces the impersonal image of "government" with a personal image of Carter, himself: "I'd like to ask the President this: Why is it more inflationary to let the people keep their money and spend it the way they like than to let him keep that money and spend it the way he likes?" At this time Reagan, very strategically and effectively, points directly at his opponent.

In an effort to portray himself as the one man in whom the people can put their trust, in contrast with an image of Reagan as a man who must consult experts and delegate his authority to others, Carter instead succeeds in alienating himself from the people: "There have been six or eight areas of combat evolve in other parts of the world. In each case I alone weighed the decision with moderation, with care, with thoughtfulness, sometimes consulting experts. I have learned that when an issue is difficult, chances are the experts will be divided fifty-fifty. The final decision is made by the man in the Oval Office. It's a lonely job. . . but a gratifying one." In correlation with this type of contrast, Carter often accuses Reagan of being an irresponsible, belligerent man with dangerous ideas. In doing so, Carter appears to be trying to belittle Reagan,

using ammunition such as "experience in the Oval Office." The result is that Carter ends up appearing pompous.

A similar contrast involves Reagan's use of illustrations which associate himself with the people: "I wish the President could have been there when I was talking with a group of teenagers who were Black. . . "and" I stood in the South Bronx on the same spot that Carter stood on in 1977. It looks like a bombed-out city. . . and I talked to a man who asked me, 'Do I have reason to hope that I can somehow take care of my family again?'" In doing this, Reagan draws a picture for the audience that shows himself in touch with the people and their desires. The only person that Carter mentions talking with or asking advice from is his daughter, Amy, and the only time he associates himself with a group of citizens is when he says "I am a southerner. I share the opinion. . . to deregulate major industries." The group that Carter most frequently associates himself with is that of past Presidents: "If there had been one less vote per precinct, John Kennedy would never have been President. . .Humphrey would have been President, not Nixon. . . ." This tactic could be either advantageous or detrimental, depending on how many people share his opinion of past leaders. If it was advantageous at all, Reagan succeeded in pulling the rug out from under Carter by stating that even though Carter claimed to be working for the same SALT Treaty as his predecessors,

president Ford is "emphatically against" the treaty Carter proposes.

In addressing the question about the future of a multi-racial society, Reagan uses the phrase "All of us together" can work toward that goal. However, Carter replies to the question in a quite different manner by twice mentioning the fact that he brought several minority individuals into his administration. Yet those few individuals only very indirectly affect society as a whole, and it is doubtful whether Carter's emphasis on this fact appealed to the millions of poor, uneducated, lower-class Blacks to whom the question referred.

Although Carter frequently mentions the fact that he is in the "mainstream" of America, he seldom uses any rhetoric to illustrate it. Reagan, on the other hand, never makes any direct statement that "he is one of us," but through the use of subtle suggestion, drives home his point. Examples of this are his continued use of the first-person plural: "I'd like to see us a little more free, as we once were," and his reference to that institution which is closest to the heart of the Middle Class American: "Free Enterprise can do a better job of producing the things that people need than government can," and again in his suggestion to "take government off the backs of the people--and turn it back into your hands again."

It is also obvious that Carter is out of touch with what the "mainstream" of America wants. Probably one of his sharpest blows is when he states, "Inflation, unemployment, the cities, are all important issues, but they pale in insignificance in the duties of an American President, when compared with the control of nuclear weapons." Although this statement might ultimately be true, it should be viewed as a matter of opinion, and obviously not the opinion of the American electorate. According to an April 1980 Gallup survey, "the problem cited most often is the high cost of living--by seventy four percent--far overshadowing the percentage who name international problems--seventeen percent."⁵ This concern about a decent standard of living is not peculiar to the U.S., but seems to be a characteristic everywhere, perhaps indicating that it is a part of human nature to be first concerned about one's own welfare. Dan D. Nimmo states in his book Popular Images of Politics:

A comprehensive study of the aspirations and fears of mass populations throughout the world appeared in 1965 (Hadley Cantril, The Pattern of Human Concerns (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1965). Investigators interviewed representative samples of the population of twelve nations (a total sample of nearly 20,000 people) about their personal hopes and fears and concerns they held for their nations.

The results revealed that the people in the nations under study were primarily concerned with economic, health, and family matters rather

than social, international and political affairs. Economic aspirations and fears were particularly dominant concerns; ranked in the order of the number of people who named a particular concern, "hoping for an improved or decent standard of living" was the chief concern of the world's population.⁶

In light of these findings, it seems that Carter's emphasis on international affairs is a bit misguided. His continued mentioning of things such as "acts of violence against Jews in France and in Israel," of "preserving the peace and extending it to others--in the Middle East, the negotiations between Israel and Egypt are a step forward," seem to overemphasize issues that the American public is not as concerned about as it is about its own pocketbook. On the other hand, even when Reagan replies to a question about arms control, he does not let the economic issue slide: "We must have a consistent foreign policy and a strong economy."

Carter's continued emphasis on peace and pacifism is probably a bit strong also, considering that when in January of 1980, he himself declared that the U.S. would use military force if necessary to defend the Persian Gulf countries against a possible Soviet attack, by a better than three-to-one ratio the American public gave its backing to Carter's position, with seventy one percent in favor of nineteen percent opposed.⁷

Another rhetorical slip of Carter's was his response to the question about a multi-racial society. He began by saying "our nation is one of refugees, of immigrants, who have hopes

for a better life. . ." His point that America has always been a multiracial society is a pertinent point in answering the question, but his choice of words could be better, considering the recent, rather touchy, "Boat People" incident with Cuba. According to an April-May Gallup report,

Among the ninety seven percent who have heard or read about the immigration of Cubans to Florida, fifty six percent say the U.S. should not allow the Cubans to settle here, while thirty five percent hold the opposite view. The findings from another question dealing with our immigration policy in general make it clear that many who oppose the entry of the Cuban refugees are concerned about the unemployment rate in the U.S. In fact, two out of three persons believed the U.S. government should halt all immigration until the national unemployment rate--now at 7.8 percent--falls below five percent.

From the beginning of the debate through the closing statement, Carter portrayed an undesirable image of himself, and failed to parallel his issues of emphasis with those of his audience, while Reagan focused not on himself as an individual, but on his ideals which corresponded with the viewpoint of the audience. Carter's closing statement was weak in that it dwelled on the past and made little mention of the future, while Reagan's statement involved more action: "All of these problems can be cured. All solved." For the first time in the debate Reagan mentioned that he would like to be a leader "of a crusade against our economic woes. . . and I would like to lead it with your help." According to

Nimmo, "one issue that voters respond to is whether conditions are 'good' or 'bad.' The popular image of the nature of the times can produce defections from the party of one's own self-image. . . In these instances (when conditions seem bad) the nature of the times provides a symbol of a growing discontent, wariness, and a time for change."⁹ Obviously Carter and Reagan together convinced the American public that it was time for a change.

NOTES

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¹Martin Schram, Running For President 1976--The Carter Campaign (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), p. 251.

²Otis M. Walter, "On the Varieties of Rhetorical Criticism," Essays on Rhetorical Criticism, Thomas Nilsen, ed. (New York: Random House, 1968) p. 158-172.

³Walter, p. 162.

⁴Walter Lipmann, Public Opinion, (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 88.

⁵The Gallup Opinion Index, Report number 177 (April-May, 1980), p. 22.

⁶Dan D. Nimmo, Popular Images of Politics, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974), p. 105.

⁷The Gallup Opinion Index, Report number 178 (June 1980), p. 29.

⁸The Gallup Opinion Index, Report number 177 (April-May, 1980), p. 6.

⁹Nimmo, p. 123-124.