

JIMMY CARTER: A MAN ON A MISSION
AN ANALYSIS OF CARTER'S WORK TO RESTORE FAITH IN THE US GOVERNMENT
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3800415

Master Thesis

200401064

15 Credits

Dr. Van den Berk

June 29, 2012

18.406 words

Introduction.

James Earl Carter was the 39th president of the United States. He served one term, from 1977 until 1981. The Democrat from Georgia defeated the Republican Gerald Ford in the election in 1976 and now faced the difficult task of presiding over a disillusioned country. Carter himself was a devout Christian, but he was also convinced that people should be allowed to have their own religion.¹ His religion helped gain him the trust of the people, which was very important in the late 1970s. Due to the Watergate scandal a few years prior, the new president faced a nation that was very distrusting of its government. Carter was well aware of this, and he had stated in his campaign that he would never lie.² This gesture was appreciated by the American people, who had lost all faith in the people governing the White House. During his presidency, Carter arguably succeeded in bringing integrity and honesty to the government, although he had decidedly more trouble in getting people to believe in his skills as a national leader.³

Besides Watergate, other factors contributed to people losing faith in the country as well. In the 1970s, the United States was suffering through economic decline and was also deeply divided over issues such as race and ethnicity.⁴ The war in Vietnam had left deep scars on the country too. For those reasons, Carter's simplicity and straightforwardness were highly appealing to the people.⁵ Carter's honesty had helped him win the elections in 1976, but it could not save him four years later. His own party supported him in the primaries, but he lost against Ronald Reagan in the elections.

It was not easy for President Jimmy Carter when he was in office. Even his staunchest critics acknowledge that any new president would have to face many difficult issues in 1977. Watergate, an economic depression, and Vietnam placed significant constraints on the administration, but also factors such as the breakdown of the party system and the rise of political action committees contributed to a difficult presidency.⁶ It is often thought that Carter did not achieve much during his time as president. Critics argue that although he faced many problems, he should have been able to do much more. When he took place in the Oval Office in 1977 he had little political experience: he had only been the governor of Georgia. During his presidency Carter often had trouble passing

1 Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 2001) 122.

2 Pauline Maier and others, eds., *Inventing America: A History of the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006) 906.

3 Ibid., 918.

4 Schulman, *Seventies*, 123.

5 Ibid., 124.

6 Burton I. Kaufman and Scott Kaufman, *The Presidency of James Earl Carter Jr.* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006) xii.

legislation through Congress, even though the Democrats had the majority there.⁷

An important aspect of Carter was his Christianity. He was part of the Southern Baptist Convention, a conservative Protestant Church. His religion was something Carter was proud of and which he was very open about. He had participated in missionary work in the sixties, buying Bibles for people who had none.⁸ Carter saw his political role as an implementation of his religion. Through his political power he believed he could help people, like he believed he should as a Christian.⁹ It is interesting to examine how Carter's ideology influenced his presidency, and especially his foreign policy.

Especially his dedication to human rights can serve as an example of the merging of his personal ideology and his foreign policy. Critics feared that these human rights efforts were a danger to the policy of détente and that they might alienate some of the US allies. However, Carter was successful in making human rights an important part of US foreign policy.¹⁰ For Carter, being a Christian meant that he had the moral duty to help people, and this is clearly visible in his human rights policy.

His human rights efforts also served another purpose: they were a good way to improve the mood in the nation. By giving the people a foreign policy to be proud of, Carter hoped that people would look more favorably at the government. A large part of Carter's new human rights policy was that he would no longer unquestionably support right-wing dictators, like the US had done in the past to protect the US and the rest of the world from the spread of Communism.

Several scholars argue that Carter was not an effective president. They point at his failures, especially his inability to be a good political leader. One of the harshest academics to discuss Carter is Victor Lasky, who states on the first page of his book *Jimmy Carter: The Man and the Myth*: “And he [Carter] is, undoubtedly, one of the more inept [presidents]. Rarely in the history of the Republic has there been an occupant of the Oval Office who demonstrated so quickly an inability to conduct even the simplest affairs of state.”¹¹ Lasky is not alone in his opinion, although he is probably the most unforgiving among his colleagues. Burton and Scott Kaufman share Lasky's opinion, but they acknowledge that Carter had the misfortune of entering the White House in a difficult time.¹²

Other scholars have a more positive view of Carter's presidency, although none of them

7 Jeff Bloodworth, “‘The Program for Better Jobs and Income’: Welfare Reform, Liberalism, and the Failed Presidency of Jimmy Carter,” *International Social Science Review* 81, no. 3/4 (2006): 136.

8 Betty Glad, *Jimmy Carter: In Search of the Great White House* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980), 110.

9 *Ibid.*, 111.

10 Maier, *Inventing America*, 910.

11 Victor Lasky, *Jimmy Carter: The Man and the Myth*, (New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1979), 11.

12 Kaufman, *Presidency*, xii.

claim that Carter was flawless. Kenneth Stein, for example, sees Carter as an unprejudiced problem solver, but also as an inexperienced president.¹³ Bruce Schulman is a bit more reserved in his analysis of Carter, describing him as uninspiring and fuzzy, but he adds that Carter was also honest and well-meaning.¹⁴ Betty Glad sees Jimmy Carter as an occasionally naive man, but one who was always kind and ready to improve the world.¹⁵ The fact that every writer seems to have a different opinion on Carter indicates that there is still no general consensus on his presidency.

This essay will focus on Carter's efforts to restore faith in the government again and in particular Carter's focus on human rights as a part of the attempt to restore faith in the government. I will examine what the problems in American society were in the 1970s, and how Carter tried to solve these. I will also closely analyze his speeches, the symbolic language he used and the symbolic actions he took. Furthermore, I will look at how scholars view Carter and his presidency, in order to find out how academics viewed this. Finally, I want to examine what Carter did in terms of fighting for human rights and whether that helped make the Americans feel better about themselves and their nation. The research question is as follows: Why and how did Carter set out to restore the faith in the government? Was he successful according to scholars and did Carter's unique approach to human rights help him in this regard?

This topic is relevant because although there is much written about Carter's presidency, especially about his failures in domestic policy and his success with the Camp David Accords, there is not much research done on the feeling of "malaise" in the nation in the 1970s and how Carter tried to fix that. The findings of this research could perhaps lead to a reevaluation of his presidency. It is also important to examine how his human rights efforts influenced American society in the late 1970s.

For the first chapter I selected several books by various academics and scholars. The works were selected by subject (either Carter, or American foreign policy) and availability. I compared and contrasted the scholars' analyses and divided them into two categories: positive and negative. The second chapter looks at the modern history of the United States and which issues would still have a profound effect on the society. I mostly used general history books for this, together with articles dealing with specific subjects.

For the third chapter I closely analyzed Carter's speeches, as well as statements he made in his autobiography. I also looked at his personal beliefs and what is written about his religion. Glad's biography of Carter proved very useful in this regard. For the final chapter I have looked closely at

13 Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 37.

14 Schulman, *Seventies*, 123.

15 Glad, *Search*, 477.

Carter's human rights efforts. Most of the sources I used were history books and works focusing on foreign policy. I looked at the situation in the countries involved before the US intervened and at the result after intervention. Furthermore, I examined whether Carter kept his promises about shaping his new foreign policies around the notion of human rights.

Finally, in the conclusion, I answered the research question and I briefly looked at how Carter's presidency ended. For the sake of the argument I do not discuss Carter's life after his presidency, but it is interesting to note that in 2002, he won the Nobel Peace prize for: “his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development.”¹⁶

16 “The Nobel Peace Prize 2002”, *Nobelprize.org*, 2002, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2002/ (accessed June 1, 2012).

Chapter 1.

Scholars' Analysis of Carter.

Similar to all other American presidents, Carter has received both praise as well as critique for his work. In this chapter I will briefly outline how different academics think about Carter and his presidency. The reason for this subject is that Carter wanted to change the opinion of the American people. It is thus a logical choice to examine what the opinion of Americans was after Carter's presidency. I believe that the most interesting manner of examining this would be by looking at what scholars have written about Carter, both during and right after his presidency (early eighties) and in the decades after. Their analyses of Carter vary very much and would therefore represent the general opinion of the American society. The first part of this chapter will focus on the analyses of scholars who are predominantly positive about Carter and his presidency and the second part will focus on the more negative conclusions scholars have reached. Within the two separate parts the scholars will be discussed in chronological order.

I will try to discuss each author in order to find out how they saw Carter's human rights efforts and if they thought that he was successful in restoring faith in the government again.

1. Positive analyses.

In *The United States, the United Nations, and Human Rights: the Eleanor Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter eras* (1979), Mower discusses human rights, and, like most other scholars who discuss Jimmy Carter and human rights, Mower is positive about Carter's contribution. Mower points out that critics often argue that Carter could have done more, but for Mower, Carter had done enough. It was not easy to make human rights such an important issue in foreign policy and Carter did a good job in bringing it to the attention of the people. According to Mower, Carter succeeded in permanently placing human rights on the priority list. Americans felt that it was right to look beyond their borders and help other people. Carter demonstrated that there were many advantages to investing in human rights, such as improving the image of the US and making a shift to Communism less attractive to third-world countries (see chapter four). Thanks to Carter, the US government will always be concerned with human rights (as evidenced by the existence of the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor).¹⁷ For Mower, Carter has at least succeeded in

¹⁷ Alfred Glenn Mower, *The United States, The United Nations, and Human Rights: The Eleanor Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter Eras* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979) 194.

promoting human rights and this had a positive effect on American society.

Contrary to Mower, Glad, in *Jimmy Carter: In Search of the Great White House* (1980) hardly mentions Carter's human rights efforts. Glad is, however, the most positive about Jimmy Carter and his presidency out of all the scholars mentioned here. Glad has chosen to focus more on Carter himself than on his policies, which might explain why she has a more positive view on him than some of the other scholars. She also wrote the book when Carter was still in office, so it was impossible for Glad to take everything about Carter's presidency into account. Glad describes Carter as having a great political style, he knew how to motivate people and speak the right words at the right time, and as someone who was very good at campaigning. She portrays him as a kind and good man, who tried his best to be a great president. Glad also offers some critique on Carter though. According to Glad, Carter failed to set a clear social and economic course for his government. He did create plans and policies, but very often he did not follow them. For Glad, Carter was someone who meant well, in terms of helping the US and its citizens, but who also tried too hard to show that he was good at his job. As a result, he was not very capable as a leader, only as a campaigner.¹⁸ Glad's focus on Carter as a person indicates that she holds him in high regard, because a focus on his policies would most likely not give such a positive view of Carter. For Glad, Carter helped Americans by being an honest and good man, and not through his policies, not even his human rights policy.

Rozell, on the other hand, does focus on Carter's policies and is actually relatively positive about Carter's accomplishments. In *The Press and the Carter Presidency* (1989), Rozell discusses how the press viewed Carter and his accomplishments as president. Rozell mentions both the positive reactions to Carter and the negative reactions, which makes his book quite objective. It becomes clear, however, that Rozell does not fully agree with the sometimes very negative opinion of the press during the Carter years. Rozell points out that although some critique was not undeserved, the very negative remarks made by the press are not always justified. Rozell argues that Carter has accomplished several major feats and that he should have gotten more recognition for them than what the press gave him at the time. Rozell also states that some journalists had a different definition of leadership than the one Carter had and that this too contributed to the negative portrayals of Carter in the press. A third point that Rozell discusses is connected to the broader problems in American society in the 1970s: namely that people, including journalists, did no longer trust the presidency. Perhaps journalists had an even bigger distrust of presidents, because of the clashes that occurred between journalists and the presidency during Watergate and the

¹⁸ Glad, *Search*, 18.

Vietnam war.¹⁹ In short, Rozell regards the Carter presidency as positive, and he disagrees with the negative manner in which Carter was often portrayed in the press.

The editors of *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era* (1998) are relatively positive about Carter. In their introduction they openly disagree with Kaufman and even with Schulman's more negative remarks. They note that Carter's presidency was not perfect and that he has accomplished more when he was no longer president, than during his presidency. Most likely they are referring to Carter's human rights efforts which he continued after having left the White House. Fink and Graham also see him as a president who had the misfortune to lead a party that was not very popular, despite the mistakes made by the Republican Party. They state that Carter has acquired the reputation of being politically naïve and self-defeating, referring to Carter's hostility to interest groups bargaining and his trusteeship style of leadership. However, they point out that most presidents who came after him have never dared to make the same choices Carter has made, even if they were the right choices.²⁰ For Fink and Graham, Carter could have accomplished more while he was president, but they argue that his human rights efforts were admirable and moderately successful, and that, had he been given a better chance (referring to the problems within the Democratic Party), Carter would have made a good president.²¹

Another author who disagrees with the notion that Carter was naïve is Stein. Stein's book is called *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin, and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (1999), which already indicates how Stein views Carter's efforts with regard to the Camp David Accords. Stein goes against the common conclusions of other scholars when he states: "To say that Carter was naïve about politics is too simple an explanation."²² According to Stein, Carter made some very good choices, but his inexperience made it sometimes difficult to oversee everything.²³ He calls Carter a problem solver who was willing to take on any problem he was faced with. According to Stein, Carter was very good at finding solutions to difficult situations, which he demonstrated in the negotiations with the Arab world and Israel. However, Stein also points out that Carter could sometimes be impatient when he had already envisioned a solution, and the other party still needed to think about it. He would sometimes see a situation as only black or white, thereby disregarding history or traditions.²⁴ However, all in all, Stein sees Carter as a smart and capable president, who could perhaps solve American problems as well.

19 Mark J. Rozell, *The Press and the Carter Presidency* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989) 3.

20 Gary M. Fink and Hugh Davis Graham, *The Carter Presidency: Policy Choices in the Post-New Deal Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998) 5.

21 *Ibid.*, 5.

22 Stein, *Diplomacy*, 38.

23 *Ibid.*, 38.

24 *Ibid.*, 38.

For Schulman, Carter's uninspiring and bland style (Carter did not throw big parties, nor did he get involved in scandals), was exactly what the American people needed in the 1970s. In his book: *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (2001), Schulman is carefully positive about Carter. He calls him a successful businessman, also describes him as being honest and not eager to convert people to his own religion. However, Schulman also points out some of the mistakes Carter made, for example some of his policy choices with regard to the economic crisis. He also points to Carter's reputation for fuzziness, by which he meant that Carter was never quite clear on which direction he wanted to take the US. Overall, Schulman describes Carter as a well-meaning man, with a doomed presidency.²⁵ Schulman concludes by expressing his regrets that Carter was not able to do better and that it was not truly his fault that his presidency failed.²⁶ Schulman does not explicitly discuss human rights.

Hult and Walcott are perhaps the most objective of all scholars discussed here. In *Empowering the White House: Governance Under Nixon, Ford, and Carter* (2004) they do mention some of the problems Carter had to face, but they are careful never to place the blame anywhere. They point out that Carter's decision to work without a chief of staff did not help him in his presidency. However, like other scholars, they acknowledge that Carter meant well and was trying to make the right choices in a time when people had lost faith in the government.²⁷ Hult and Walcott point out that Carter tried to make the government seem less overbearing, but that his method of refusing to appoint a chief of staff did not help there. However, they admire that Carter sought another solution, namely to go back to how his predecessors worked, without letting his pride get in the way.²⁸

In the last book that will be discussed in this part of the chapter, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1965-1989* (2006), Schmitz mostly discusses Carter's fight for human rights. Since Carter put much effort in that, Schmitz is quite positive about Carter's accomplishments in that regard. Schmitz is one of the few scholars who is not very concerned with Carter the man, but who is nevertheless positive about him. Schmitz applauds Carter's dedication to human rights, even when it was sometimes difficult for Carter to focus on non-Americans when the US was having problems of its own. Schmitz acknowledges that Carter could have handled some situations better, but he concludes that Carter's human rights policy had greatly improved the United

25 Schulman, *Seventies*, 124.

26 *Ibid.*, 143.

27 Karen Marie Hult and Charles E. Walcott, *Empowering the White House: Governance Under Nixon, Ford, and Carter* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004) 41.

28 *Ibid.*, 45.

States' international position, which in turn helped American society.²⁹

2. Negative analyses.

The book by Joan and George Melloan, *The Carter Economy* (1978), focuses mostly on the American economy before and during President Carter's first year in office. They are among the most objective scholars with regard to the debate whether Carter was an effective president or not. They share Glad's conclusion when they state that Carter was good at campaigning, but they do state that he made mistakes when it came to improving the economy.³⁰

Compared to Melloan and Melloan, Lasky's *Jimmy Carter: The Man & the Myth* (1979), is much more critical. Lasky begins his book with stating that Carter was one of the most inept men to ever become President of the United States. Lasky mercilessly points out all of Carter's failures and wrong policy choices, like his inability to negotiate with Congress and his economic policy. However, even he has to acknowledge that Carter had good intentions for the country and that he entered the White House at a difficult time, when many Americans did not trust the government. Especially Carter's qualities as a leader are questioned by Lasky, who believes that any accomplishments Carter made came more from his position as a president than from any actual skills as a leader. At the end of the first chapter of his book, Lasky states: "And yet James Earl Carter, Jr., proved superlative in getting himself elected. That may well go down as his greatest achievement."³¹ This statement makes it clear that Lasky does not think very highly of Carter's presidency, but a short personal note at the end of his book hints that Lasky thought that Carter "the man", was actually a very nice person, who was not even upset by Lasky's book.³²

Not only Lasky believed that Carter failed as a president. Schulzinger, in *American Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (1990), is mostly concerned with Carter's foreign policy and his new human rights policy, just like Schmitz was. Unlike Schmitz, however, Schulzinger regards Carter's human rights efforts as having mostly failed. He points out the inconsistencies in the policies and remarks that the American people preferred to focus more on themselves.³³ He does acknowledge, like other scholars, that Jimmy Carter entered the White House at a very difficult

29 David F. Schmitz, *The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 192.

30 George Melloan and Joan Melloan, *The Carter Economy* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1978) 18.

31 Lasky, *Myth*, 21.

32 Lasky, *Myth*, 391.

33 Robert D. Schulzinger, *American Diplomacy In The Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990) 317.

time.³⁴

Burton and Scott Kaufman, who wrote *The Presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.*, 2006, have a mixed view on Carter's presidency. They argue that Carter did try to reach the people with a message about honesty and integrity that appealed to them. Furthermore, they state that his presidency improved after the first two years and that his human rights efforts were admirable, but that the economic and political situation in the US and abroad was making it very difficult for Carter to be an effective president. However, the writers also point out that the mistakes Carter had made in the first two years of his presidency were not easily undone. He also made several errors in political judgment during his time in office and his government was at times very chaotic, for example because Carter did not appoint a chief of staff at the beginning of his presidency. Carter's biggest failure, however, was that he was unable to provide a clear message or a direction for the people where they could build on. For Kaufman and Kaufman, Carter failed in restoring faith in the government.³⁵

Maier, Smith, Keyssar, and Kevles have written a history book (*Inventing America: A History of the United States*, 2006) that discusses the entire American history. This means that they have tried to be as objective as possible. They generally view Carter the same way most other writers who try to be objective do. Carter, the man, was honest and he really wanted the best for the American people. He tried his best and was sincere in his efforts to make the world a better place. However, Carter, the president, was too inexperienced to be an effective leader, since he had only served as the governor of Georgia.³⁶ His human rights efforts were admirable and the writers point out that this was perhaps among the most successful parts of his presidency, as was his role in the Camp David Accords, but they were not enough to save his presidency.³⁷ Quite fittingly, they named the chapter dedicated to Carter: "Carter: A Presidency of Limits".³⁸

Conclusion.

The difference in analyses of these highly educated people shows that it is not easy to come to a very specific conclusion on how successful Carter was, or how effective. The general consensus seems to be that Carter tried really hard to be a good president, who attempted to make the Americans feel good, proud, and confident about themselves and their country again. When he

34 Ibid., 336.

35 Kaufman, *Presidency*, xiii.

36 Maier, *Inventing America*, 906.

37 Ibid., 908.

38 Ibid., 906.

made policy choices he looked at how they would help the country, and not himself. Some of the scholars point out his successes in office, such as his human rights policy and the Camp David Accords and they argue that even though the American people might not have reelected him, he did much to better the country. Others tend to focus more on the issues that Carter failed to solve. America was still in an economic crisis when Carter left the White House. They do not feel that Carter succeeded in restoring faith in the government again. According to them, Carter's lack of a good relationship with Congress made him an ineffective president, which did not help to restore the people's faith in the presidency. These scholars argue that Carter was naïve and not fit for the presidency, because he, for instance, did not appoint a chief of staff at first and was too stubborn when negotiating with Congress. With so many different points of view, the only conclusion one can come to is that Carter's presidency will remain the subject of debate for quite awhile.

This essay acknowledges both sides of the debate on Carter's presidency, but it mostly sides with the scholars who have a positive view of Carter. This essay focuses on 1970s American society, Carter's symbolism, and his human rights efforts. Carter's accomplishments in especially the latter subject indicate that scholars should perhaps reevaluate his presidency and that the claims that Carter was inefficient are at least partly unfounded.

Chapter 2.

American Society in the 1970s.

In order to fully understand why Carter would have thought that American society needed a government with strong ideological policies and why Carter needed to restore faith in the government again, it is important to understand what was happening in American society during and right before Carter's presidency. This chapter will focus on several major issues Americans were facing during the late 1970s. The first part of this chapter will focus on the Vietnam war. The second part will discuss Nixon and the Watergate scandal. The third part will be about the economic crisis. And lastly, the fourth part will explain how American society was influenced by the findings of the Church Committee.

1. The Vietnam War.

The Vietnam war was one of several battles during the Cold War. The Cold War itself was waged by the US and the Soviet Union (SU), but the SU did not participate in the Vietnam war. The Cold War continued throughout the seventies and only ended in the late 1980s. The Vietnam war technically began in the sixties, but it influenced much of the seventies. The American participation in the conflict began in 1964, when Johnson ordered air strikes against North Vietnam. It was ended in 1973 by Nixon. The war had been a gruesome one, with the number of American casualties exceeding 58,000.³⁹

The Vietnam war and its aftermath had an enormous influence on US society. Besides the young men that were killed, many veterans returned injured, traumatized, or both. The war cost over 150 billion dollar and it was not even successful for the United States.⁴⁰ Many Americans protested against the war when it was still fought, and now that the war was over they were still not pleased with the government. A great number of Americans lost faith in their own country because of the failure of defeating the communists in Vietnam. Furthermore, they had lost faith in the government, which had refused to listen to the people.

The Vietnam war was the first war that was broadcast on television. For the first time ever, Americans could see what was really happening on the far away battlefields. People were already questioning whether a war like this was actually justified and the horror of the images seen on

³⁹ Maier, *Inventing America*, 905.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 905.

television turned this questioning into a certainty that the war was wrong. One of the most gruesome images that Americans saw was the South Vietnamese national police chief executing an NLF prisoner at point blank range. Needless to say, Americans were horrified by the images in the media.⁴¹

Many students protested against the Vietnam war. The students saw the war as something that showed what was wrong with American society. The draft did that as well. Most of the men that were drafted came from low-income families, usually working class. Not only the students protested against the war; an entire anti-war movement developed. The anti-war movement was made up out of the baby boomers, who were born in the late 1940s. Their counterculture shaped the anti-war movement and together they influenced American society. People changed their ideas about sexuality and love, capitalism and society.⁴² Many young Americans became more free when it came to sex and more opposed to the harsh realities of capitalism. The counterculture became less popular in the early Seventies, but it left behind a legacy of changed values and attitudes, such as a more liberal view on sexuality.

The anti-war movement and counterculture were not all about gentleness and free love though. There was another group in America that opposed the war as well, but they were less friendly about it. Black Americans were furious because of their lower status, even though they officially had equal rights. Relatively more black people died in Vietnam than white people did and blacks were also relatively more frequently drafted than whites. This dissatisfaction resulted in race riots, that would sweep across the nation in the 1960s.⁴³

The anti-war movement and the rise of Black Power caused a backlash among middle- and lower class whites. Many of them still supported the war and were angry that their fellow Americans did not appreciate the losses they had suffered when their sons would go to fight in Vietnam, never to return. These Americans did not want to just end the war; they wanted to end the war with a military victory.⁴⁴

In 1968 the Tet offensive began, when several North Vietnamese attacked the US embassy in Saigon. This attack was the beginning of three weeks of intense battles between the Americans and the Vietcong. The Americans won a military victory, but the moral victory was for the communists. After the offensive, many Americans joined the anti-war movement, having realized that the war had been a mistake. Before the Tet offensive, 28% of Americans were against the war, while 56%

41 Mark Atwood Lawrence, *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 125.

42 Schulman, *Seventies*, 2.

43 Maier, *Inventing America*, 882.

44 *Ibid.*, 883.

supported the war. Immediately after Tet, 40% stated that they opposed the war and 40% still supported it.⁴⁵

Nixon, who was elected president in 1968, was well aware of the nation's stance on the war. He promised he would end the war in Vietnam in an honorable way. For Nixon, this meant that he would install a pro-US government in Saigon, which would nevertheless be independent. Nixon also stated that the US would no longer send soldiers abroad to fight communists. This statement became known as the Nixon Doctrine. The Doctrine resulted in "Vietnamization" in South Vietnam: the US increased its aid to the South Vietnamese, so they could fight the war on their own.⁴⁶ Nixon pulled back most of the American troops and ended the draft. However, he secretly continued to bomb North Vietnam, while he also sent his national security adviser Kissinger to negotiate with the foreign minister of the North Vietnamese, Le Duc Tho.⁴⁷ Nixon, meanwhile, also spoke with Moscow, in the hope that the Soviet Union would agree to support peace on American terms, in exchange for better trade relations.⁴⁸

Unfortunately for Nixon, his strategy did not work as well as he had hoped. The SU did not have enough power over North Vietnam to really benefit the US. Furthermore, the communist Vietnamese were active in Cambodia and Laos too, and they did not stop their actions there. Nixon responded by invading Cambodia, prompting the North Vietnamese to increase their support for the Cambodian communists, led by the Khmer Rouge. Many Americans at home protested this action by Nixon: some of Nixon's own staff even resigned. Students protested at their universities, to which the government responded with violence. Several students were killed by government forces during riots, making the American people even angrier.⁴⁹

Despite Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, the North Vietnamese could still fight back, which they did with a major offensive in 1972. Most of the American troops had already left the country, so Nixon decided to fight them in a different way: by bombing several North Vietnamese cities. Meanwhile, Kissinger was still trying to come to an agreement with Le Duc Tho. They almost reached an agreement in 1972, but the leader of the South Vietnamese would not agree to some of the terms. When in turn Le Duc Tho demanded more concessions, Nixon sent even more B-52s to bomb North Vietnam. These violent actions were strongly condemned around the world and in the US as well. Eventually a peace treaty was signed between the two countries, who were both tired of the ongoing war and bloodshed. Nixon declared that he had succeeded in ending the war in an

45 Schulman, *Seventies*, 7.

46 Lawrence, *Vietnam*, 140.

47 Maier, *Inventing America*, 893.

48 Lawrence, *Vietnam*, 139.

49 Maier, *Inventing America*, 893.

honorable way, just like he promised. It is true that South Vietnam still stood and that Thieu remained in office, but the future of Vietnam was uncertain. The peace accord allowed American troops to go home, but it had not truly resolved anything in the Cold War.⁵⁰

Although the war had officially ended, it had irrevocably changed American society. Many Americans believed the Vietnam war had been unnecessary and they felt that their friends and family members had died in vain in Vietnam. The US had not lost the war, but it had not won either. This led many Americans to doubt their nation's superiority. People had seen in the news some of the atrocities that come with war and it had made them oppose the war even more. The government had repeatedly broken its promises to end the war and they had also responded violently against protesters. All these factors combined led to a severe lack of trust in the government. As will be explained later, this was a problem that Carter wanted to solve.

2. The Watergate Scandal.

The Vietnam war was not the only major issue in the 1970s that made people lose their trust in the government and in their country. Nixon managed to make the American government seem even less trustworthy, in what is commonly known as the Watergate Scandal. In the beginning of his election campaign, Nixon created a Committee to Reelect the President, popularly known as CREEP. The purpose of CREEP was to help Nixon win the 1972 election, for which it used several questionable methods. CREEP targeted the Democrats and went as far as spying on them, as was evidenced by the Watergate break-in.⁵¹

On June 17, 1972, five men were caught by a security guard when they tried to break into the Democratic National Committee Headquarters in the Watergate building. They had equipment with them that indicated that they wanted to spy on the Democrats and further investigation linked them to the White House and CREEP.⁵² This affair was problematic enough on its own, but it got even worse when Nixon made several mistakes.

It is unclear whether Nixon knew that members of CREEP would break in to the Watergate building, but it is clear that he knew about it shortly after. Nixon decided that it was best if the crime would be covered up. Unfortunately for Nixon, his orders were caught on tape, which he himself had installed in the White House. Another order, where he told the CIA to tell the FBI that they should stop the investigation, was caught on tape as well. The CIA refused to carry out Nixon's

⁵⁰ Lawrence, *Vietnam*, 159.

⁵¹ Maier, *Inventing America*, 901.

⁵² "Chronology: 1971-72," *Watergate.info*, <http://watergate.info/chronology/1971-72-chronology> (accessed June 8, 2012).

order, because it amounted to an obstruction of justice. Nixon then offered money to the burglars if they would deny any ties to the White House.⁵³

What followed were several months of lies, cover-ups, and blackmail. Nixon tried everything to keep the truth from coming out, severely abusing his power as a president. He fired several people in his administration and hired new ones, but this did not help him either. Early 1974 a number of Nixon's former aides were indicted and Nixon was named as an unindicted co-conspirator. In July of that same year, the House Judiciary Committee adopted three articles of impeachment in which President Nixon was accused of obstructing justice in the Watergate investigation, abusing his power, and resisting the committee's subpoenas. All the Democrats on the committee voted on the charges and several Republicans joined them.⁵⁴

It got even worse for Nixon when the Supreme Court ruled that he had to give up the tapes from the White House, which Nixon had thus far refused to do. Nixon had only given the Court edited transcriptions of the tapes, which, although they revealed that Nixon was an impolite and bigoted man, did not provide the evidence that would prove Nixon's involvement in Watergate. However, when Nixon was forced to give up the tapes, they revealed what many people had believed for a long time: evidence that Nixon had personally been involved in the cover-up of the Watergate break-in. Nixon, who knew that he would most likely be impeached, decided to resign on August 9, 1974.

For many people Watergate proved that the institution of the presidency could not be trusted. Their president had almost gotten away with several illegal activities and he had lied on many occasions as well. The faith in the president did not return when Ford took over when Nixon resigned. Ford was never officially elected as a vice-president, because Nixon and Congress had appointed him to that position after the elections. Americans did not only distrust their new president, but also the whole institution of the president. They felt betrayed by the one man that should have been the most reliable. The President had lied, and his successor was not chosen by the American people. They had very little reason to trust anyone occupying the White House. The loss of faith of the American people was a problem that Carter recognized and thus he tried to solve this when he became president.

3. The economic crisis.

53 Maier, *Inventing America*, 901.

54 "Analysis of House Judiciary Committee Impeachment Votes," *Watergate.info*, <http://watergate.info/impeachment/analysis-judiciary-committee-impeachment-votes> (accessed June 8, 2012)

A third factor also contributed to a general feeling of malaise in the US in the 1970s: the economic crisis. The crisis in the economy was closely connected to the energy crisis, but it had been partly caused in the first place by the Vietnam war. President Johnson had continued spending a significant amount of money on welfare programs, but he had not raised the taxes, which were already quite high. The extra costs of the war proved to be too much for the American economy.⁵⁵

In the 1970s economic growth was halting and inflation was accelerating. In 1968 the Federal Reserve Board had raised interest rates to 5,5%, which was the highest level since 1929, right before the Great Depression began.⁵⁶ Foreign investors sold their dollars, which drove down the value of the currency. Prices rose with a rate of 4% per year, severely affecting American citizens. Stagflation formed a large problem too. Stagflation is the phenomenon where there are high inflation rates, but also high unemployment rates.⁵⁷ It comes across as a paradox, since under normal circumstances inflation does not occur together with high unemployment rates, but in the 1970s it was real problem that Americans had to face.

The economic crisis changed the way Americans looked at money. One result of the faltering economy was the shift in attitude toward taxation. Where Americans had first been fine with paying high taxes, in the 1970s they revolted against taxation. Interest rates were climbing in the Seventies, reaching as high as 20%. Many Americans decided to invest their money, because leaving it in the bank would only bring the value down. This influenced American society as well. People made more use of credit cards, caring less about getting in debt, because saving money was only making it worth less. It was better to borrow money, and immediately spend it, because when you paid it back the dollar would have already gone down in value. This behavior did not help the economy recover.⁵⁸

The energy crisis made the economic crisis worse as well. Americans had become increasingly dependent on foreign oil, but the price of oil had almost doubled in the 1970s. This was caused by the oil embargo of 1973. The OPEC countries refused to sell oil to the US, leading to a major shortage of oil. The embargo lasted until 1974, but it heavily influenced the American economy, which for a large part depended on oil.

American products became more expensive for foreign buyers, which affected the American export. For the first time since 1893, Americans imported more products than they exported. This trade deficit negatively affected the economy, so Nixon devalued the dollar. He hoped that this would discourage import and encourage export. Nixon even went so far as to end the dollar's

55 Maier, *Inventing America*, 897.

56 Schulman, *Seventies*, 7.

57 *Ibid.*, 8.

58 *Ibid.*, 135.

convertibility into gold, which made the price of the dollar more flexible.⁵⁹ The measures were unprecedented and it made the people realize just how much trouble the economy was in.

Rising prices, unemployment, and an oil shortage made daily life more difficult for many middle and lower class Americans. One example of how the energy crisis affected the average American were the regulations on the purchase of gas. Gas stations were ordered by the governments to close on Sunday and people could only buy fuel every other day.⁶⁰ This angered many American consumers and contributed to the misery felt by the worsening economy.

4. The Church Committee.

The Watergate Scandal had made it painfully clear that for too long the president had been able to do whatever he wanted, without anyone checking to see if he was not abusing his power. After Watergate, the US Congress was determined to find out what exactly had taken place, especially with regard to the nation's intelligence agencies, i.e. the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Central Intelligence Agency.⁶¹

In 1975 the US Senate established the United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities. This committee, commonly known as the Church Committee, after Chairman Frank Church, was charged with investigating what the CIA and the FBI had been up to for the past few years. The possibility that the agencies had conducted illegal affairs had come to light when investigative journalist Seymour Hersh found out that the CIA not only worked to destabilize foreign governments, but also spied on Americans.⁶²

President Ford and his administration disliked the Church Committee: they feared that the investigation would expose secret intelligence operations. Despite this opposition, the Committee interviewed hundreds of people and conducted over 250 hearings. The investigation was less public than the Watergate investigation had been due to the nature of some of the operations of the agencies. This led many critics to accuse the Committee of treasonous activity. When a CIA agent was killed in Greece, many Americans sided with the CIA and the FBI, instead of with Church and his fellow investigators. However, when they made the final report public in May 1976, it became clear that several of the operations by the FBI and the CIA had not been legal.⁶³

Especially the findings on the involvement of the United States in attempts to assassinate

59 Maier, *Inventing America*, 898.

60 Ibid., 896.

61 Ibid., 903.

62 "Church Committee Created," *United States Senate*,

http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Church_Committee_Created.htm (accessed April 17, 2012).

63 Ibid.

foreign leaders shocked people. Some of the more well known leaders that had been, or still were the target of the CIA were Fidel Castro, Rafael Trujillo, and the Diem brothers. The report also brought to light the development of a general “executive action” (i.e. assassination) capability by the CIA, which would make the Agency more powerful.⁶⁴ The Church Committee's report had several results. For the US Congress it became clear that there needed to be continuous surveillance of both the CIA and the FBI. For this purpose the permanent Select Committee on Intelligence was created.⁶⁵ A second result of the Committee's findings was that President Ford issued Executive Order 11905, which banned US assassinations of foreign leaders.⁶⁶

A third result, one that was not intended, was that the American citizens lost even more faith in their government. They already lost faith in the president and to a certain extent Congress, but now they had learned that they could not trust the FBI and the CIA either. For Americans, there remained very little to believe in and this led to a general feeling of misery in the nation.⁶⁷

Conclusion.

In the years right before Jimmy Carter was elected president, several events occurred that made people lose their faith in America, the government, and the future. For Carter, this was an unacceptable situation. He believed that the nation needed strong ideological policies, which would help restore faith in the nation. The “Crisis of Confidence”, as Carter called it later, had begun with the Vietnam war in the 1960s.⁶⁸ For many Americans, the war had been a disaster. There was no victory and a great number of people had died for something many Americans no longer truly believed in. Many people blamed the government for what had happened. According to them, the war could have ended sooner if only the government had been willing. Furthermore, many people condemned the violent measures taken against the (often student) protesters.

In addition to the resentment the war had caused for Americans, the Vietnam War was also partly to blame for the economic depression. President Johnson had spent too much money on Vietnam and as a result American prices skyrocketed. Stagflation combined with a fuel shortage, led to a depression, affecting almost all Americans. Once again, the American people blamed the government and its faulty financial policies.

64 “Church Committee Reports,” AARC,
http://www.aarclibrary.org/publib/contents/church/contents_church_reports.htm (accessed April 16, 2012).

65 “Church Committee Created,” *United States Senate*,
http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/minute/Church_Committee_Created.htm (accessed April 17, 2012).

66 “President Gerald R. Ford's Executive Order 11905: United States Foreign Intelligence Activities,”
<http://www.ford.utexas.edu/LIBRARY/speeches/760110e.htm#SEC.%205> (accessed April 19, 2012).

67 Schulman, *Seventies*, 49.

68 *Ibid.*, 48.

The political situation did not inspire much confidence in the country either. Not only had Nixon continued the Vietnam war after promising that he would not, he had also been involved in illegal activities. This came to light in what became known as the Watergate Scandal. Nixon's denial of his involvement of a break-in, the court case, and the White House tapes shook people's belief in the institution of the presidency.

And finally, to bring down the general mood of the nation even more, the findings of the Church Committee became public in 1976. The report was shocking and for many Americans it proved once more that their own government was not to be trusted.

This was the nation that elected Jimmy Carter as their President in 1976. He faced distrust, not only from his political opponents, but also from the American people themselves. Carter had to somehow convince the people that he was trustworthy and honest. For Carter, this was best done by implementing strong ideological policies, based on his religion and personal beliefs. Only then would people believe in the United States again.

Chapter 3.

Symbolism and Speeches.

Jimmy Carter was well aware of the issues that Americans struggled with. He knew that he needed to be an honest and fair president if he wanted people to regain their trust in the presidency and the government again. Carter saw a solution in his personal ideology and religion: if he was able to demonstrate that it was his faith that drove him, and not his personal gain, people would not have to fear him and his power as president. In his autobiography Carter writes:

I realized that my own election had been aided by a deep desire among the people for open government, based on a new and fresh commitment to changing some of the Washington habits which had made it possible for the American people to be misled. [...] So, in spite of Ford's healing service, the ghosts of Watergate still haunted the White House. We wanted to exorcise them and welcome friendlier spirits.⁶⁹

This quote indicates that Carter planned to make people have faith in the government again and that he knew how people felt. In this chapter I will examine in what ways Carter used his speeches to regain the people's trust. I will also look at some of Carter's more symbolic acts that were often more to show that he wanted to keep his promises than that they were actually useful. I will begin however, by briefly describing Carter's religion and ideology, because he was very much influenced by his faith and it was a reason that many people trusted him.⁷⁰

1. Carter's religion.

Jimmy Carter was a devout Christian. He belonged to the largest Protestant denomination in the US: the Southern Baptist Convention, a more fundamentalist and conservative branch of the Baptist Church. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) generally believes in Biblical inerrancy and has relatively conservative ideas about women, sexuality, and, until 1995, civil rights.⁷¹

Carter had always been part of that Church, attending and leading Sunday school, but it was

⁶⁹ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982) 27.

⁷⁰ Schulman, *Seventies*, 121.

⁷¹ "Resolution On Racial Reconciliation On The 150th Anniversary Of The Southern Baptist Convention," *sbc.net*, 1995, <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amresolution.asp?id=899> (accessed May 20, 2012).

only after losing the election for the Governorship of Georgia in 1966, that he fully embraced the Christian religion.⁷² From that moment on, Carter was a “born again Christian”. He realized that he was willing to give up everything for Christ, except politics. After that moment he decided to better his life in Christ's name, but he would remain active in politics. Carter also became more active in the Church and eventually participated in missionary work. He traveled around the country to distribute Bibles and to convince people to become Christians.⁷³

Interestingly, Carter and his wife Rosalynn decided to quit the Church in 2000, stating that it had become too rigid. Especially the way women were treated displeased Carter. The SBC had stated a short while before Carter quit, that wives should submit to their husbands and that women cannot become pastors. In a letter send to 75,000 members of the SBC, Carter explains that he believes in equality and that therefore he can no longer belong to the Church.⁷⁴

Many of Carter's morals and ideas came from his faith. He was very open about his religion and it would often come up in conversations with other people. For example, when he met with the Iowa State Democratic chairman Tom Whitney, they spent two hours talking about Christian love. They also discussed the “I am Third” notion, where God comes first, family and friends second, and oneself third.⁷⁵ Carter would also discuss his “born again” experience on multiple occasions. He told the story of how he and his sister had been walking and talking outside, when he had asked her how she experienced her religion. After her answer Carter had realized that he lacked “a complete commitment to Christ, a presence of the Holy Spirit in my life in a more profound and personal way.”⁷⁶

Carter's morals carried through in his presidency. His political views came from a simple moralism and he believed that people should honor the same moral standards in politics as they did in their daily life. In one of his books, *Why Not the Best?*, Carter points this out:

Our personal problems are magnified when we assume different standard of morality and ethics in our own lives as we shift from one responsibility or milieu to another. Should elected officials assume different levels of concern, compassion, or love toward their own family or loved ones? Should a businessman like me have a lower standard of honesty and integrity in dealing with my customers than I assume as a Sunday School teacher or a church

72 Glad, *Search*, 108.

73 *Ibid.*, 110.

74 “Carter cuts SBC ties,” *Christian Century*, November, 2000, 1142.

75 Glad, *Search*, 330.

76 *Ibid.*, 332.

deacon? Of course not. But we do.⁷⁷

This quote shows that Carter intended to incorporate his personal beliefs, which came from his religion, in his presidency. It is clear that many of Carter's choices with regard to foreign policy were influenced by his Christianity. For example, his human rights efforts were in part influenced by his Christian belief that one should help others.

2. Carter's rhetoric and symbolism.

Jimmy Carter expressed his intention to help the nation recover from what had happened even before his inaugural address. In his Acceptance Speech, which he held in July 1976 when he was nominated as the presidential candidate for the Democratic Party, Carter told his fellow Democrats of his intentions for the US. In this speech he demonstrated his knowledge of the problems gripping the nation in the Seventies. Carter referred to 1976 as the year that: “we give the government of this country back to the people of this country.”⁷⁸ He then continued by saying:

There is a new mood in America. We have been shaken by a tragic war abroad and by scandals and broken promises at home. Our people are searching for new voices and new ideas and new leaders. [...] For I believe we can come through this time of trouble stronger than ever. [...] Guided by lasting and simple moral values, we have emerged idealists without illusions, realists who still know the old dreams of justice and liberty, of country and community.⁷⁹

The first part of the quote clearly refers to the Vietnam war and Watergate. Carter acknowledges people's distrust, but he also offers hope that under his leadership, the nation can be restored to its former glory.

Carter then discusses the recent history of the Democratic Party and he talks about how the rich are unfairly privileged. He also mentions that he is proud of America, but that he is aware of the problems in the nation:

[In] recent years our nation has seen a failure of leadership. We have been hurt, and we have been disillusioned. [...] We feel that moral decay has weakened our

⁷⁷ Jimmy Carter, *Why Not the Best?: The First Fifty Years* (Arkansas: University of Arkansas Press, 1975) 136.

⁷⁸ “Acceptance Speech,” *Jimmy Carter Library*,

http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/acceptance_speech.pdf (accessed April 7, 2012) 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

country, that it is crippled by a lack of goals and values [...] We have been without leadership too long. [...] We want to have faith again. We want to be proud again. We just want the truth again.⁸⁰

Carter repeatedly refers back to these problems of American society. Near the end of his speech he explicitly names three of the four issues mentioned in the previous chapter.

Each time our nation has made a serious mistake the American people have been excluded from the process. The tragedy of Vietnam and Cambodia, the disgrace of Watergate, and the embarrassment of the CIA revelations could have been avoided if our government had simply reflected the sound judgement and good common sense and the high moral character of the American people.⁸¹

Carter is careful to only blame the previous government and to tell the people that they were innocent in everything. He explains in the next part that he wants to listen closely to the people and how he wants to get rid of the bureaucracy and secrecy that comes with government. He ends his speech by talking about fixing the economy and bringing peace to the American people.⁸²

In his inaugural address, Carter uses the same rhetoric. He talks about what is wrong with the country, but he also praises the American people. Furthermore, he explains what he finds important and what he wants to change. His speech was very short, but clear and easy to understand. In his autobiography, Carter mentions that his speech was partly inspired by Woodrow Wilson's address. Carter states: "Like him, I felt I was taking office at a time when Americans desired a return to first principles by their government."⁸³ This sentiment is clearly present in Carter's own address. In the first part of his speech, Carter said:

This inauguration ceremony marks a new beginning, a new dedication within our Government, and a new spirit among us all. A President may sense and proclaim that new spirit, but only a people can provide it.⁸⁴

As in his acceptance speech, Carter mentions faith as well. He did not necessarily mean faith as in

80 Ibid., 2.

81 Ibid., 3.

82 Ibid., 5.

83 Carter, *Memoirs*, 19.

84 "Inaugural Address of President Jimmy Carter," *Jimmy Carter Library*, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/inaugadd.phtml> (accessed April 8, 2012).

religion, but faith in each other and faith in the nation. Another recurring theme are his frequent mentions of the past. Carter believed that by emphasizing the remembered history and shared past, Americans would realize that the United States is one nation and that the only way the US could be great again was by believing in each other.⁸⁵

The new president also discussed the issues that were most important to him; human rights, environmental quality, nuclear arms control, and the search for justice and peace. About human rights Carter said: “Our commitment to human rights must be absolute, our laws fair, our natural beauty preserved; the powerful must not persecute the weak, and human dignity must be enhanced.”⁸⁶ Later on in his presidency, Carter would try to make these words into official policy.

An interesting additional theme that was absent in his acceptance speech, but present in his inaugural address, was religion. For someone who was as religious as Carter was, he did not mention it much in his speeches. However, the fact that he began his inaugural address with a quote from the Bible shows that Carter believed that there was a place for religion in politics. The passage Carter uses is from Micah 6:8.

He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.⁸⁷

In his autobiography, Carter explains that he chose these words to remind the American people that if they wanted to improve their commitment to justice and mercy, they would need to seek God's help and guidance.⁸⁸

One of the issues that Americans faced in the 1970s which was mentioned in the second chapter was the energy crisis. Carter held several speeches in the first few months of his presidency where he explained the problem and proposed several solutions and goals. Three of his speeches with regard to the energy crisis will be discussed here, because they clearly show how Carter tried to use symbolic acts and language to restore the faith of the people in the government.

The first of the speeches regarding energy is more well known for its symbolism than for what was actually said, although that too was important. This was a speech that was held on February 2nd, two weeks after Carter's inauguration. It was also the first of many fireside chats. In that speech, Carter spoke about the energy shortage in the US, and solemnly declared that the

⁸⁵ Carter, *Memoirs*, 20.

⁸⁶ Inaugural Address Carter

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Carter, *Memoirs*, 20.

energy crisis was permanent.⁸⁹ His message was not wholly unexpected, but the way he brought it was. The new president was sitting by a lit fireplace and was wearing a cardigan sweater. He did this to show the American people that not only did they have to conserve energy, he, as the president, would have to do the same.⁹⁰ After this speech, *Time* called Carter “a master of the symbolic act”, in an article called “The Administration: Warm Words from Jimmy Cardigan”.⁹¹

The second speech that will be discussed here is the speech where Carter referred to the energy crisis as, “the moral equivalent of war.” The speech was held on the 18th of April, 1977. Carter proposed a plan that would help solve the oil shortage in the country. In this speech Carter showed different sides of himself, according to *Newsweek*, he sometimes came across as a Baptist evangelist, but also as an engineer or a true leader, especially when he asked the people to fight this moral equivalent of war. His language, rhetoric, and honesty was liked by the people; a Gallup poll showed that most Americans supported not only his plan, but also the president himself.⁹²

The third speech about the energy crisis is also often referred to as the “malaise” speech. It is one of Carter's most well-known speeches and it was broadcast on July 15, 1979. The official name of the speech was the “Crisis of Confidence Speech”, and the word “malaise” is never even used.⁹³ In this speech, Carter places part of the blame of the crisis on the Americans themselves, although he is careful to blame the government as well. Carter also listed some of the, occasionally negative, comments he had received from his colleagues and other Americans. He ended the speech with the following paragraph:

In closing, let me say this: I will do my best, but I will not do it alone. Let your voice be heard. Whenever you have a chance, say something good about our country. With God's help and for the sake of our Nation, it is time for us to join hands in America. Let us commit ourselves together to a rebirth of the American spirit. Working together with our common faith we cannot fail.⁹⁴

And people let their voice be heard, just like Carter had asked. In the days following the speech, Carter received more letters and phone calls than he had ever gotten before. Most of them were positive. Carter's approval rating in the polls went up and it seemed like the people did not mind

89 Maier, *Inventing America*, 907.

90 *Ibid.*, 907.

91 “The Administration: Warm Words from Jimmy Cardigan,” *Time*, February 14, 1977, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,914802,00.html> (accessed April 20, 2012).

92 Schulman, *Seventies*, 127.

93 “Carter's 'Crisis of Confidence' Speech,” *PBS.org*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/general-article/carter-crisis-speech/> (accessed April 20, 2012).

94 “Crisis of Confidence Speech,” *Miller Center*, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3402> (accessed April 21, 2012).

that Carter had criticized them in his speech.⁹⁵ However, the ratings soon dropped.

Although the people had supported Carter immediately after his speech, a few days later they changed their mind. They were no longer willing to blame themselves, but instead they blamed Carter. It did not help either that shortly after the speech, Carter decided to make some radical changes to the government. On July 17, he asked his entire Cabinet to resign. He ultimately accepted the resignations of five of them. What made matters worse was that the new Chief of Staff circulated a questionnaire which seemed to many staff members to be a loyalty oath. The shake-up in the Cabinet sent the wrong message to the American people. Carter wanted to show the Americans that he was going to be a tougher president by firing people, but it appeared to the people that the government was falling apart.⁹⁶ In this instance, Carter's symbolism failed to restore the faith in the government.

The final speech that will be discussed here is Carter's final speech as President of the United States. Even though Carter would soon be out of power to try to make the people trust the government again, he did want to give the Americans a final message about their country. He acknowledged that the US was still in a crisis, and that it would last for at least a few decades, but he also added that he believed that together, the American people could overcome their problems. Furthermore, Carter told the people that he regarded citizens as higher in rank than a president. He did, however, also warn the people that they should help each other and not just focus on themselves. He called upon the people to remember their values and morals, even in this difficult time. Carter ended his speech the same way he began: by thanking the American people.⁹⁷ Maybe that was the most symbolic of all his acts; even though they had not voted for him, he still showed his love and gratitude to them. Perhaps he hoped that if he would lead by example, the Americans would develop a more positive view of their nation.

In the first few months in office Carter would often take certain actions that did not mean very much in the greater scheme of things, but which represented his dedication to keeping his promises. Some of those acts also served to show to the people that he was a common American, just like they were. The first of these acts happened on his very first day as president. Especially in the first half year Carter was very focused on proving that he meant well.

After Carter had finished his inaugural address it was time for him to go to the White House. Instead of letting himself be driven there by car, which was what everyone expected, Carter decided

95 Kevin Mattson, "Jimmy Carter's 'Crisis of Confidence' Speech still matters," *The Monitor*, July 10, 2009, <http://www.themonitor.com/articles/speech-28450-jimmy-carter.html> (accessed April 20, 2012).

96 Crisis of Confidence Speech, *PBS.org*

97 "President Jimmy Carter's Farewell Address," *Jimmy Carter Library*, <http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/farewell.phtml> (accessed May 1, 2012).

to walk the mile and a half there. Carter, his wife, and their children waved at the people as they walked calmly down the street. Many people were concerned for their safety, but, as Carter would later state, he felt like he was among friends.⁹⁸ Carter was well aware of how people would perceive this unexpected walk. He wanted to demonstrate that he trusted the American people and that they could trust him. Furthermore, he wanted to show that he was closer to the people than for example Nixon had been. For most people present during the inauguration, Carter's decision to walk to the White House came as a complete surprise. The plan had intentionally been kept a secret, to minimize security threats, but also to make the walk a dramatic moment.⁹⁹

The walk to the White House was not the only symbol that demonstrated that Carter wanted to regain the trust of the people. Carter had invited many different religious leaders to promote religious unity, even though he himself was a Christian. One of the stands at the White House used solar energy, to indicate that Carter thought about the future and the energy crisis. Even the way the White House was decorated for Carter's inauguration was done in a way that promoted Carter's simple background.¹⁰⁰ As was tradition, there were many events throughout Washington DC to celebrate Carter's victory. What was unusual about it, was that most of them were either free, or had very low prices. Carter wanted everyone to be able to enjoy them. Carter and his wife Rosalynn had made one other symbolic decision as well: Rosalynn wore a dress she had already worn before to the inaugural ball when Carter had become governor. For most people this would be considered normal, but a First Lady was expected to always wear the most expensive designer clothes. This decision once again demonstrated Carter's emphasis on simplicity.¹⁰¹

After his inauguration, Carter wanted to show Americans that he was still determined to make them trust the government again. For that purpose, he continued his symbolic acts to demonstrate what kind of man he was and to prove that his words were not only that, but that he would act on them too. One such example of symbolism in his acts was that Carter enrolled his nine-year-old daughter Amy in a public, predominantly black, school. He had promised to do that in his campaign and the fact that he actually went through with it showed that he meant to keep his promises. This was the first time since Theodore Roosevelt's son went to a public school that the child of a president did not attend a private school. Carter's act also demonstrated that he and his family were just ordinary Americans like everyone else.¹⁰² Furthermore, he hired a convicted criminal as a nanny for his daughter, because he believed that the black woman had been a victim of

98 Carter, *Memoirs*, 17.

99 Carter, *Memoirs*, 18.

100 Glad, *Search*, 409.

101 Carter, *Memoirs*, 25.

102 W. Herbert, "Parent's Choice, President's Dilemma," *US News and World Report* 114, no. 2 (1993): 10.

racial prejudice.¹⁰³

On January 23, Carter had his first official ceremony. He had to swear-in twelve Cabinet members and instead of letting the Marine Corps band play the two traditional songs, Carter announced that he would perform the ceremony without the band. Carter believed that that was more appropriate for a non-military ceremony.¹⁰⁴ Carter also ordered that the White House staff would have to drive their own cars and that foreign leaders would be greeted without the extravagant military displays and other ceremonies. All of this was meant to show the people that the barrier that had existed between the president and the people was now gone.¹⁰⁵

Carter made some changes for himself as well, in those first few days. When he and his family discovered that all the doors to the stairwells were permanently locked, which meant that people would always have to take the elevator, he unlocked all of them. He also told the security men that were always with him to keep their distance. Carter wanted his solitude and his freedom, not liking how formal everything was around him.¹⁰⁶ This personal trait of his was also visible in many of the things he changed in his capacity as a president.

Not all of his changes early in his presidency worked the way Carter had hoped. When Carter went to Georgia shortly after his inauguration, he thought he could save money if he would go by car instead of by helicopter. Eventually it turned out that this had cost much more in terms of security than if Carter would have taken the helicopter there. The measures in cutting back on the traditional ceremonies also received several complaints from people who thought Carter had gone too far. As a result Carter allowed the band to play “Hail to the Chief” on certain special occasions.¹⁰⁷

An important step that Carter took in improving the relations between the American people and the government was the way he approached the media. At his first press conference, Carter promised that he would hold twenty press conferences a year. He kept his promise for that first year, even giving two additional conferences. Carter even suggested that he wanted to open the Cabinet meetings to the press, although that idea never went anywhere.¹⁰⁸ It does, however, indicate how devoted Carter was to being open to the people.

Carter did not stop there, though. He also reached out to the people in other ways. In early March, Carter tried something that no other president had done before: a call-in show. For two hours long, the new president answered questions of American citizens. That this initiative was

103 Carter, *Memoirs*, 30.

104 Ibid., 26.

105 Glad, *Search*, 410.

106 Carter, *Memoirs*, 25.

107 Ibid., 27.

108 Glad, *Search*, 411.

welcome was visible in the high number of people that called, which was more than nine million. Carter managed to talk to forty-two people and he did his best to answer their questions as well as possible. Carter aimed for even more direct contact with the people though. Even before the call-in show, Carter had announced that he wanted five to ten percent of the guests at state dinners to be average Americans, like people who had helped in his campaign. This plan garnered a favorable response from the public.¹⁰⁹

Not only did he invite people to come to him, Carter also went out to visit the people. He went to several towns early in his presidency and mingled with the people there and talked to them, also answering their questions. He went to people's houses as well, on some occasions staying there overnight. Furthermore, Carter sent 450,000 letters to the American people, in which he asked for their suggestions to solve the energy crisis.¹¹⁰

Carter's symbolism was not appreciated by everyone though. He had hoped that it would make people have faith in the government again, and to a certain extent he was successful in that. The Americans saw Carter as trustworthy and straightforward. He would not lie to them.¹¹¹ However, some people, especially journalists, disliked his symbolism. They wondered if Carter would actually do something, or if he would just make gestures to the people to convince them that they could trust the government. To them, it seemed that Carter was more preoccupied with satisfying the people than with making decisions or proving that he was a good leader.¹¹² However, Carter had promised that he would restore faith in the country and government again, and that was what he tried to do with his use of symbolic acts. That he was successful in that, especially in the beginning of his presidency, was also visible in the polls: Carter's popularity had risen from 51% on Election Day, to 71% three months later.¹¹³

Conclusion.

For Carter, one of the most important tasks he wanted to fulfill as a president was to get people to trust the government again and have faith in themselves and the country. He had made several promises during his campaign and during his first few speeches and he intended to keep these promises. He knew that the American people were wary of especially the institution of the president. They felt betrayed by events such as Watergate and the findings of the Church

109 Ibid., 411.

110 Ibid., 411.

111 Schulman, *Seventies*, 124.

112 Glad, *Search*, 413.

113 Lasky, *Myth*, 320.

Commission. Carter, as a Christian seemed like a safe choice as a president. His religion and personal beliefs would prevent him from lying like Nixon had done.

Carter himself agreed with the assumptions of the people and he repeatedly mentioned in his speeches what his intentions for the country were. He did not mention his religion very much, but the people knew that he was very religious in his own home. However, he did not want to force his religion on others. As *Playboy* interviewer Robert Scheer put it after he had conducted the notorious interview with Carter for the soft-porn magazine: “[Carter was] a guy who believes in his personal God and will let the rest of us believe whatever the hell we want.”¹¹⁴ Although Carter did not want to force his religion on others, it did influence many of his decisions, because he often acted on what he believed was right, which in turn originated from his Christianity.

114 Robert Scheer, “The Playboy Interview: Jimmy Carter,” *Playboy* 23, no. 11 (1976): 91.

Chapter 4.

Human Rights.

As has become clear from the previous chapters, Jimmy Carter was interested in restoring the American people's faith in the government. The new president felt that this was necessary, due to several events that had occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Issues such as Watergate and the findings of the Church Committee made it hard for people to trust the American government and their president. In order to improve American society, and to prove to the people that he was a good and honest man, Carter relied on his rhetoric and several symbolic acts. He attempted to be as clear as possible in his speeches and he explained his plans and vision of the future. Furthermore, he took certain actions that were symbols of his sincerity. Some of them were also acts that Carter had promised to do if he would be elected president. Several scholars admire this form of leadership that Carter used, but others see Carter as an incompetent president who made bad choices.

However, there is one subject in which Carter was involved that most scholars view in a positive light: his human rights efforts. Carter had already mentioned in his earliest speech as president, his inaugural address, that he was interested in not only making America a better place, but the whole world.¹¹⁵ Carter believed that investing in human rights was one way to make this happen. He also believed that his human rights efforts would convince the American people that he was a good and compassionate president. As Schmitz states:

From the first day of his presidency, Jimmy Carter set out to fundamentally alter the direction of American foreign policy. Coming to office after the disillusionment brought about by the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Church Committee's revelations concerning American support for right-wing dictators and covert activities abroad, Carter promised to take American foreign policy in a new direction by shaping it around the principles of human rights and non-intervention.¹¹⁶

This indicates that Carter wanted to positively change American society by changing the US foreign policy. Where in the past certain actions taken in other countries had made people lose their faith in the government, Carter set out to restore faith in the presidency and the White House by changing the direction of foreign policy. A new foreign policy would have other positive effects as well, such

115 Inaugural Address, *Jimmy Carter Library*

116 Schmitz, *Dictatorships*, 143.

as an increased respect for the US by other countries. The US' foreign policy record was not in all cases something to be proud of (Vietnam, for instance), and if the US would change their policy, other countries would perhaps appreciate the effort. Furthermore, Carter also believed that the American economy would be helped if the US would no longer have to fight the Cold War. Schmitz summarized Carter's intentions for this foreign policy as follows:

His human rights policy sought to create a post-Cold War foreign policy that placed American ideals first, changed the fundamental nature of American relations with the Third World, and reduced the costs of the Cold War while still protecting essential American interests.¹¹⁷

American interests being, of course, keeping Communism away and providing security and stability for US citizens.¹¹⁸ Carter's focus on the economy would also help the American society. As was explained in chapter two, the malaise of the 1970's was partly due to the economic crisis. If Carter would save money by changing US foreign policy, than perhaps the American economy could recover.

Carter's opinion on human rights is perhaps most visible in a commencement speech held at Notre Dame University in 1977. In that speech he explained that the current foreign policy was harmful to the American society, because it was based on fear. Fear of communism, of the Soviet Union. If the people of the United States wanted to be free from that fear, they needed to change their foreign policy to one “that the American people both support and, for a change, know about and understand.”¹¹⁹ In the final part of that sentence, Carter refers to Nixon's foreign policy and the secrecy surrounding that. Nixon was often not open about his plans in other nations and even if he was, it was often not very clear. Carter wanted to change that by making his policies both public and easy to understand. A foreign policy that was based on morals and values and thus focused on human rights would be the best option.

The question that will be examined in this chapter is: What were Carter's human rights efforts and did they have a positive effect on the American society? I will first discuss what actions the United States took in the fight for human rights and then in the conclusion I will briefly touch upon the effects it might have had on the American society.

117 Ibid., 143.

118 Ibid., 143.

119 “Human Rights and Foreign Policy,” *Teaching American History*, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=727> (accessed May 8, 2012).

1. Actions taken by the US in the fight for human rights.

Not everything the US did to improve the circumstances of people in other countries involved the US taking action in those countries themselves. Much of the effort went into creating bureaus and groups that in turn would help to give people around the world more rights. Therefore, in this part of the chapter I will not just discuss the countries in which Carter took action, but also what his administration changed internally in the US.

When Carter came to power, America was still in the middle of the Cold War. In order to make sure that the communists would not suddenly acquire too much power, the United States had often supported right-wing dictators. These dictators did not always take the rights of their citizens very seriously, but the US was prepared to turn a blind eye if it meant that these dictators would keep Communism at bay.¹²⁰ In the US itself people were not very concerned about human rights for non-Americans either. When Nixon became president, he was aware that the Americans were isolationists and that they were not interested in any foreign entanglements. The Vietnam war had seen to that. For Kissinger and Nixon, fighting for human rights abroad was not very important, especially not if it meant that the US could lose its hold on Communism that way.¹²¹ For some of Carter's predecessors, like Nixon and Johnson, it had been acceptable to support right-wing dictators in third-world countries, because they stood a chance against Communism. The idea was that as long as a dictator kept control over his country, other political parties, such as a communist party, would be unable to thrive.

For Carter this was unacceptable. In his autobiography he states: “To me, the demonstration of American idealism was a practical and realistic approach to foreign affairs, and moral principles were the best foundation for the exertion of American power and influence.”¹²² He disregarded the notion that the United States should give right-wing dictators and oppressive regimes free rein. Carter understood why in the past the US supported those regimes, but he believed that introducing democracy to those countries would lead to better living conditions for the citizens, but also keep Communism at bay. If the citizens of third-world countries would no longer be suppressed by dictators, but free to vote for any political party they wanted, they were less likely to turn to Communism. This, in turn would halt the spread of Communism, which is what America wanted. Carter adds that a human rights effort would also strengthen the bond between America and developing countries, which would in turn benefit the US in the long term. If countries would look

120 Schmitz, *Dictatorships*, 143.

121 Nicolai N. Petro, *The Predicament of Human Rights: The Carter and Reagan Policies* (Lanham: University of America, 1983) 9.

122 Carter, *Memoirs*, 143.

favorable to the US, then they might become valuable allies. And, Carter adds almost as an afterthought, fighting for human rights “was the right thing to do.”¹²³ For a man who was known for his morals and Christian background, the focus on other arguments than the moral character of human rights efforts is curious to say the least. This can perhaps be explained by noting that although Carter thought morality to be very important, he was not blind to the more practical matters of ruling a country. Another explanation would be that Carter might have thought that he could combine idealism and pragmatism: idealism *as* practical solution. Using strong American ideology to steer a country in the right direction might work and was thus a practical solution. It does not mean, however, that Carter only thought about how the fight for human rights could help America, which becomes clear when one looks at the instances where his efforts would often help the citizens of foreign countries, but was not helpful for America.¹²⁴

2. Bureaus.

In order to make human rights more important in foreign policy, the Carter administration created or expanded two institutions within the State Department. The first was the Bureau of Human Rights, created by Congress. The bureau was headed by former civil rights activist Patricia Derian, and she received the title of Assistant Secretary of State, which suggested how close she was to Carter's inner circle. Originally, the bureau had three departments, but it was extended to four. The bureau set out to institutionalize human rights in decisions made with regard to foreign policy. A directive was sent to all American ambassadors that they should follow the new human rights policy.¹²⁵ Every year, the bureau published an account of the situation in other nations with regard to civil and political liberties. The bureau was quite active: it denounced several nations, for example, such as The Philippines, South Korea, Chile, Brazil, and Argentina. As a result of the reports by the Bureau of Human Rights, the Carter administration cut economic aid, pressured several banks, including the World Bank, to reduce assistance to these countries and it publicly called for the release of political prisoners.¹²⁶

The Carter administration added another institution to the State Department, called the Interagency Group on Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. This group was also known as the Christopher Group, after its head, Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher. This group was established to examine US bilateral and multilateral foreign assistance programs in the light of

123 Carter, *Memoirs*, 143.

124 Petro, *Predicament*, 32.

125 Petro, *Predicament*, 28.

126 Schulzinger, *Diplomacy*, 318.

human rights conditions and also to make sure that the decisions taken in this area would be in line with the government's stance on human rights.¹²⁷ The idea was that new foreign policies and relations with other countries would always be measured against the human rights agenda. New policies needed to comply with the new human rights standards. This group was not the most effective division of the State Department (the Bureau of Human Rights accomplished more), but its creation did demonstrate that Carter was serious about making human rights a fundamental part of his administration.

Other government agencies that were involved with foreign affairs were affected as well by the administration's new policies. For example, the agency responsible for offering economic assistance to countries (the Agency for International Development), the Corporation that dealt with investments in third world countries (the Overseas Private Investment Corporation), and lastly the bank that loaned money to other countries (the Export-Import Bank), were all affected by the new focus on human rights. They had to make sure that when they invested in a country, said country had a decent human rights record, for example.¹²⁸

It is difficult to say whether Carter's foreign policy was successful, in the end: if it really improved the living conditions for people. The Bureau of Human Rights still exists though, albeit under a slightly altered name (the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor), which shows that Mower was right when he stated that Carter succeeded in permanently placing human rights on the agenda of the US.¹²⁹ A commonly heard criticism is that Carter's foreign policy was inconsistent. At times he would take action against countries and regimes that were abusive to its citizens, but sometimes Carter would support totalitarian regimes and right-wing dictators. Some of Carter's human rights efforts signify a recurring theme in Carter's presidency; Carter had good intentions, but they did not work out the way he had hoped. The fall of the shah of Iran serves as a great example of how Carter meant well, but his efforts to help foreign citizens did not have the desired effect. In the following part I will discuss four nations where Carter's new foreign policy with its focus on human rights had the most effect.

3. Iran.

The shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, could on all accounts be considered a right-wing dictator. The shah had a secret police, SAVAK, that he used to repress people. Other political parties

127 Petro, *Predicament*, 29.

128 Petro, *Predicament*, 29.

129 Mower, *Human Rights*, 194.

were powerless and some people were held as political prisoners. The shah was also determined to modernize Iran, an effort that was not well liked by the Islamic right.¹³⁰ The United States had a good relationship with Iran, and Carter even praised the shah in 1977 for ruling over a stable country in the Middle East. One of the reasons the relationship between Iran and the US was so good was because of the never-ending need for oil for the United States. Another reason was that the US believed that a strong Iran could keep the Soviet Union out of the Middle East. Even though organizations such as Amnesty International reported that the shah held over fifty thousand political prisoners, the US would not take action against Iran. The US even went as far as selling the shah weapons.¹³¹ However, when the people of Iran rose up against the shah, Carter stepped back and followed the guidelines of non-intervention set out by his own administration. Iran was turned into a religious state and many citizens actually lost some of their rights. Carter was criticized for his actions by both sides of the debate on whether the US should support dictators in the fight against Communism or not. The Americans that opposed support for right-wing dictators believed that Carter had not done enough to bring change to Iran earlier on. The other side, who still held on to the idea of containment and Cold War orthodoxy, thought that Carter should have supported the shah.¹³²

Despite these criticisms, Carter pushed through with his human rights efforts and made them the center of his foreign policy. He should perhaps have handled the situation in Iran differently, but he did succeed in presenting an alternative view of American foreign policy. Carter did not fully break with the past of supporting right-wing dictators, but these rulers could no longer be certain of American support. If they wanted aid from the US government, they would first have to show that their countries were reforming and becoming more democratic.¹³³

Iran remains well remembered for what happened there with regard to the lack of American support for a dictator. It was, however, not the first time that Carter showed the world the new policy of the US. Another country where Carter implemented his foreign policy was Chile, where the dictator Pinochet violated human rights.¹³⁴ However, in order to get a more clear view of the relationship of the US with Latin-America, one must first look at the situation in, and the history of, Panama.

4. Panama.

130 Kaufman, *Presidency*, 155.

131 Schulzinger, *Diplomacy*, 318.

132 Schmitz, *Dictatorships*, 145.

133 *Ibid.*, 145.

134 *Ibid.*, 166.

For several decades the United States had exerted much influence over Latin America. The Monroe Doctrine and the Roosevelt Corollary had allowed the US to intervene in the Latin American nations if it would keep the western hemisphere safe from, especially, Europe. During the 1930s en 1940s the US changed their policy of intervention, but it would still occasionally exert power over its southern neighbor. One example that shows how the US treated Latin America was the fight over the Panama Canal. Theodore Roosevelt had managed through several tricks to obtain the Panama Canal from the Panamanians and the presidents following Roosevelt did not want to return it to them.¹³⁵ This changed when Jimmy Carter came to power. He wanted to improve the relationship with the Latin American countries and put a stop to the US support of right-wing dictators in the region. Carter began with fixing the mistakes made with regard to the Panama Canal.

In short, around the turn of the century, Theodore Roosevelt was determined to build a canal through Central America. After much deliberation, it was decided that the canal should run through Panama, then a province of Colombia. Roosevelt managed to help Panama become an independent state and negotiated a treaty with their new self-appointed minister of foreign affairs. The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty, which granted virtual sovereignty over the Canal Zone to the US, was signed before any Panamanians could arrive in Washington. The Treaty became known as “the treaty no Panamanian signed.”¹³⁶ The Panamanians were outraged, but there was little they could do. Now, over seventy years later, Carter set out to help the Panamanians. In 1977 Carter signed the Panama Canal Treaties, which would give the Panama Canal back to Panama after 1999.¹³⁷

It was not easy for Carter to get the Treaties through Congress though. In his autobiography, Carter calls his efforts to get the treaty signed by enough Senators “the most difficult political battle I had ever faced.”¹³⁸ Carter had to lobby extensively, something that he hated to do. He got help from an unexpected ally: former president Ford. He promised Carter that he would contact Republican Senators who were still doubting if they should sign the treaties or not and convince them to sign it.¹³⁹ Carter's lobby was eventually successful: where in June 1977 only twenty-seven senators supported the treaties, in February 1978 sixty-two senators were prepared to sign the treaties. A few months later the Panama Canal Treaties were passed, with sixty-eight votes in favor and only thirty-two against.¹⁴⁰ Some scholars argue that Carter was unable to compromise and properly deal with Congress (see chapter one), but the fact that Carter succeeded in this difficult

135 Maier, *Inventing America*, 614.

136 Ibid, 615.

137 Schmitz, *Dictatorships*, 166.

138 Carter, *Memoirs*, 152.

139 Ibid., 165.

140 Glad, *Search*, 424.

task shows that he was more capable than often thought.

Carter was so grateful that he had received enough support that he sent every Senator who had helped him the following (handwritten) letter:

To Senator ---,

As President, I want to express my admiration for your support of the Panama Canal treaties. Rarely is a national leader called upon to act on such an important issue fraught with so much potential political sacrifice.

On behalf of the people of the United States, I thank you for your personal demonstration of statesmanship and political courage.

Sincerely,

*Jimmy Carter*¹⁴¹

The effort Carter put into getting the treaties signed demonstrate how important it was to him that the relationship between the US and Latin America would improve. Giving the Panama Canal back to Panama was just the beginning of his efforts to show that America had changed its foreign policy. The success Carter had with Panama shows that his foreign policy was definitely not a failure.

In April 1977 Carter held a speech to the Organization of American States (OAS), in which he set out his views on US-Latin American relations. He explained that he wanted to base his policies on mutual respect, economic development, and, of course, human rights. Carter added that the US was “eager to stand beside those who respect human right and which promote democratic ideals.”¹⁴² The new President made also sure that his intentions to help the Latin-American people would not be interpreted as a form of American intervention. Carter emphasized that he wanted to take multilateral action in the region, ergo, together with other countries and that the US would not go in by itself.¹⁴³

5. Chile.

Carter's words seemed to have a tangible effect on Pinochet, the leader of Chile. Pinochet wanted to

141 Carter, *Memoirs*, 152.

142 Schmitz, *Dictatorships*, 166.

143 Ibid., 166.

improve Chile's image with regard to human rights, both because he wanted aid from the US and because he wanted to improve the relationship with America. Pinochet released several hundred political prisoners and shut down two detention centers. He also changed trial procedures for prisoners held by the military and he promised to hold elections.¹⁴⁴ These steps taken by the dictator seemed promising, but it was not enough for the US to consent to give aid to Chile.

There was still room for improvement in the Latin-American country, especially with regard to human rights. Carter wanted to show the world and his fellow Americans, that he was serious about his concern for human rights. If the humanitarian situation in a country prompted action, then Carter would take action. If Carter would keep his promise that he would implement his new foreign policy, then Americans would see that the government could be trusted. Furthermore, they could also be proud again of what their country accomplished in another country, something that was desperately needed after Vietnam and Cambodia. Carter's dedication to human rights meant that he could not send aid to Chile as long as Pinochet did not improve the situation more than he already had. The Carter administration wanted an end to the state of siege in Chile, due process for prisoners, more information on people who had gone missing in Chile, and finally, the United States wanted to know when exactly Pinochet would make Chile a democracy. As a result of these issues in Chile, plus the knowledge that Pinochet was protecting Chilean officers who had killed several people, including a US citizen, Chile was named a "gross violator" of human rights.¹⁴⁵

As was mentioned in chapter three, Carter was fond of symbolic acts and this was no different when it came to his new foreign policy. In order to show Chile that the human rights situation in the country was very important to him, but also to remind Pinochet of the power of the US to bring about his fall, Carter received Eduardo Frei in Washington. Frei was the former president of Chile, and he stated that Carter's human rights efforts had a great impact on Chile and the world. By receiving Frei in Washington, and with him consequently stating his support for human rights in Chile, Carter sent out a clear message to Pinochet: improve on human rights, or the US would no longer help Chile and might even take further action.¹⁴⁶

Pinochet did not listen and as a result Carter reduced US aid to Chile, stopped military sales, and suspended financing. Carter did continue humanitarian aid because it was the Chilean government he wanted to punish, not the people. In the end Carter's efforts did not bring about the change he had hoped for, namely introduce a democratic system, but it did make clear that America would no longer support dictators in the region. It also showed the American people that the US did

144 Ibid., 167.

145 Ibid., 167.

146 Ibid., 168.

not need good relationships with dictators to maintain America's security from Communism.¹⁴⁷ After all, the US did not seem in greater danger from Communism than it had been before the relations with Chile went sour.

Chile and Panama were not the only nations in South America that were influenced by the change in foreign policy under the Carter administration. The fourth and final country that will be discussed here is Nicaragua, where the US succeeded in driving away the dictator Somoza.

6. Nicaragua.

Nicaragua had been under rule of the Somoza family since 1936. In 1976 the Sandinista National Liberation Front took up arms to fight Anastasio Somoza Debayle's rule. A large part of the citizens of Nicaragua supported these rebels. In the summer of 1976, the Organization of American States called for a replacement of Somoza's dictatorship by democratic rule. The United States agreed and the American ambassador tried to get Somoza to leave. America wanted to create a democratic government, but that failed when Somoza fled and the Sandinistas took over.¹⁴⁸ The US decided to refrain from intervening, because most of the people of Nicaragua seemed to support the new government. Although the outcome of the fall of Somoza was not what the administration wanted, i.e., the Sandinistas took over without holding proper democratic elections, Carter had remained true to his new foreign policy where he would not intervene if it was not necessary and where human rights came first.¹⁴⁹

Carter did try to convince the new Nicaraguan government to embrace some of America's ideology. He offered economic aid to Nicaragua, but only if the Sandinistas would switch to a western-style economy. For example, the US would provide money to Nicaragua on the condition that more than half of the money would go to the private sector. The new government also had to pay its foreign debt. The US also assisted Nicaragua in access to loans from the International Monetary Fund.¹⁵⁰ By helping Nicaragua in this manner, Carter ensured that the people in Nicaragua would have a positive view of the US and also of Capitalism. Communism was less attractive for the country and the citizens were no longer oppressed by a right-wing dictator.

The actions that Carter took that were described in this chapter were not the only ones he took with

147 Ibid., 171.

148 Schulman, *Seventies*, 323.

149 Schmitz, *Dictatorships*, 190.

150 John A. Soares, "Strategy, Ideology, and Human Rights: Jimmy Carter Confronts the Left in Central America, 1979-1981," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 4 (2006).

regard to human rights, but they are the ones that best describe his new foreign policy. Whether or not he succeeded in every attempt remains the subject of many discussions, but it is clear that he had given the Americans something to be proud of again.

Conclusion.

Although it is clear that by the time Carter left the White House he had not succeeded in bettering the human rights condition in all third-world countries, Carter had definitely succeeded in making human rights an important feature of American foreign policy. Where Carter's predecessors, notably Nixon, had turned a blind eye to the lack of democracy and human rights in US allies, Carter was not afraid to take steps to change the situation in those nations. Carter understood why other presidents had supported the dictators in the past, namely to protect the United States from the influence of Communism, but he realized that the US was not necessarily in danger if countries would go from being under the rule of a dictator, to becoming a democracy. Carter had to find a delicate balance between pressing for human rights improvements in other countries, while simultaneously maintaining a good relationship with those countries. As much as Carter wanted to better the humanitarian situation in other countries, he could not afford to antagonize multiple countries.

There were several reasons for Carter to shape his foreign policy around the concept of human rights. First of all, there were of course his personal beliefs which partly came forth from his religion. Carter believed that it was "right" to help other people, even if they were not American. Then there was the pressure from other countries and some Americans as well, who wanted the US to no longer support right-wing dictators. Many people realized that the threat of Communism did not excuse the support of dictators and the US should be more concerned with human rights than with the spread of Communism. And third, there was the feeling of malaise in the US itself and the feelings of guilt some Americans might have over starting a war in Vietnam. Carter hoped that through improving the circumstances for other people, the Americans themselves would feel better about their record with regard to their involvement in other nations. It would also perhaps help to diminish the fear of the Communist threat, if Carter would show that he did not fear the Soviet Union enough to warrant support of dictators. Schmitz summarizes these last motivations as follows:

As the development of his human rights policy showed, Carter was well aware of the continuing national security questions and dilemmas involved in creating a foreign policy based upon human rights, and of the political limits to and

criticisms of his approach, but he was convinced that American interests in the Third World would be better served by upholding American ideals and principles rather than by continuing to support right-wing dictators who violated those beliefs and created long-term instability and anti-American sentiment in their nations.¹⁵¹

A fourth reason for Carter to focus on human rights can be found in the broader American history. Americans like to think of the US as “a city upon a hill”, a phrase coined by John Winthrop in 1630. He meant that the US needed to be an ideological (religious) example to other nations.¹⁵² This idea that the US had a duty, a mission, in the world, has been persistent enough that it may very well have influenced Carter's decision to use human rights as a positive example of how nations should change their policies. Carter knew that Americans would feel better about their country if it would continue the tradition of providing a good example to other countries, in this case the care for human rights.

151 Schmitz, *Dictatorships*, 191.

152 Neil Campbell and Alasdair Kean, *American Cultural Studies: An Introduction To American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 110.

Conclusion.

“Are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things in stores than it was four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment? Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do you feel that our security is as safe, that we are as strong as we were four years ago?”¹⁵³

These were questions asked by presidential candidate Ronald Reagan during the single television debate between him and Carter, on October 29, 1980. The American people answered these questions on November 4, election day. The answer was “no”. They were not better off than they were four years ago in their opinion and that was why they voted Carter out and Reagan in.¹⁵⁴

The US was still suffering from an economic crisis and new foreign threats had risen. Iran held 66 American citizens hostage, as it had been doing for well over a year.¹⁵⁵ Americans feared for the lives of their fellow Americans and despaired at the failure of the White House to extract them. People were losing faith in the government all over again.¹⁵⁶ This was perhaps even harder for Carter to acknowledge than his subsequent defeat at the polls.

When Carter entered the White House, he became the leader of a disillusioned nation. Americans felt betrayed by their own government. They had suffered through a gruesome war, which they did not win. The people also found out about the lies of President Nixon, the morally questionable activities of the CIA and FBI, and, to top it all off, the country was in the middle of a terrible economic crisis. This feeling of malaise that was everywhere in the US is important to understand some of Carter's policy choices. He considered the improvement of the mood in the nation as a priority and he acted accordingly.

For Carter, the lack of faith in the government, and specifically the presidency, was troublesome and he resolved to prove that he, as president, could be trusted. His weapon of choice was, at first, symbolism. By making small, symbolic gestures, he hoped to show that he would keep his word. He was honest in his speeches and kept his promises. He did not always make the right choices, but it was clear for the Americans that he meant well by them. Whether or not this made him a successful, or good, president, remains the subject of debate. A number of scholars criticize Carter, arguing that he was an unnecessarily ineffective president, who was not able to lead a

153 “Reagan 1980 Are you better off than you were four years ago?”, October 29, 1980, *youtube.com*, October 2, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loBe0WXtts8> (accessed May 27, 2012).

154 Schulman, *Seventies*, 142.

155 Carter, *Memoirs*, 458.

156 Carter, *Memoirs*, 567.

country. This essay shows that this is too hard a criticism. It is true that Carter made mistakes, but considering the situation Carter found himself in when he entered the White House and the goals he set himself, such as restoring faith in the country and improving the human rights record in other countries, he did actually rather well.

The policy that Carter will be most remembered for, and which was also an attempt to lift the nation's mood, was his new foreign policy, with the explicit focus on human rights. Carter believed that helping people in other nations was the "right thing to do" and thus the US would no longer automatically support dictators who could theoretically keep Communism at bay. His new foreign policy was an improvement for many people for whom Vietnam was still a fresh memory. Furthermore, his focus on human rights was a departure from America's traditional (non-interventionist) stance on involvement with human rights in other countries. Carter was the first president who really made an effort to put human rights on the national agenda and he succeeded in this. After Carter left the White House, human rights have always remained important in US foreign policy. One might even argue that Carter brought about a cultural change, where Americans would consider other people's welfare more important.

It was not Carter's new foreign policy that was the problem in the elections though. It was the failing economy. Especially in the last few years, Carter shifted his focus from his humanitarian efforts to stimulate the economy. In his autobiography, Carter states: "my necessarily more conservative economic policies had created a still unhealed breach in the Democratic party, and [it is] ironic [...] that the issues on which we had expended the most effort were the very ones that had lost us so much political support."¹⁵⁷

The question this essay tried to answer was: why and how did Carter set out to restore the faith in the government? Was he successful according to scholars and did Carter's unique approach to human rights help him in this regard? The first part of the question has been answered throughout this essay, mostly in the last three chapters. In order to find the answers to the second part of the question, we need to look at the domestic situation in the US and the situation in other countries.

It is not easy to determine if Americans trusted their government more after Carter's presidency. It seems almost certain that they did not trust it less, considering that Carter never betrayed the trust of the people like for example Nixon had done. It is clear that Americans in the early 1980s did not think that Carter was a very good president, evidenced by the election results in 1980. One can perhaps argue that because Carter seemed to many Americans a well-meaning, honest, but ultimately an ineffective president, they at least felt that they no longer needed to

157 Ibid., 568.

distrust or even fear the government.¹⁵⁸ Thus, although Carter could not uplift the country from the feeling of malaise, he did succeed to a certain extent in restoring faith in the presidency again.

Carter fared better in foreign politics. In much of the Western world his human rights efforts were seen as admirable, even though Carter did not always reach his goal. Carter was especially successful in Panama and the Panamanians were grateful for his efforts. For some Americans, Carter's choice to give the Canal back to Panama was wrong, but most people eventually, after much campaigning by the Carter administration, considered it a good move.¹⁵⁹ Not only did Carter improve the situation with regard to human rights in several countries, it was also the focus on a successful positive foreign policy that made Americans feel better about their country and government. The fact that Pinochet changed his human rights policies even before Carter actively got involved in Chile shows that Carter's human rights efforts were taken seriously in at least some parts of the world and that they proved to be effective.

In conclusion, Carter was partly successful in restoring faith in the government. His honesty and his attempts at being as open and non-secretive about his policies helped the people to gain trust in the White House again, but it was not enough to change the general feeling of malaise in the country. His human rights efforts did help to make people, both in and outside the US, regard the US in a positive light. The general consensus of both scholars and other Americans seems to be that Carter was not a very good president in all areas, but that he was a great man.

It would be interesting for scholars to examine more closely how Carter and the US were viewed in other countries and whether his influence in several third-world countries was lasting. Furthermore, a re-examination of Carter's domestic policies might also yield very different results than what is now commonly accepted about Carter's presidency. For example, his focus on civil rights and the environment were well-received and moderately successful.¹⁶⁰ If scholars would examine Carter's results in this area, they might get a more positive view of his presidency. In the meantime, this essay hopefully succeeded in demonstrating that it is time to take a second look at the presidency of James Earl Carter, Jr.

158 Schulman, *Seventies*, 143.

159 Schulzinger, *Diplomacy*, 321.

160 Maier, *Inventing America*, 907.

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