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**CULTURE, RHETORIC, AND THE
TRAGEDY OF JIMMY CARTER**

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During the last year, the American people waged a war. It was a war about many things: about the sovereignty of Kuwait's borders and about neutralizing Iran; about protecting Israel and about nuclear destabilization in the Middle East; about the political lust of Saddam Hussein, about the political craftiness of Haffad Assad, about the political dilemmas of Jordan's King Hussein. It was a war about computerized weaponry, about Pentagon propaganda, about Arab social practices, about mass media restrictions, about glorious homecoming parades. The war in Iraq was therefore many wars; it will take scholars decades to determine which of these wars was truest. But about one thing there can be no doubt: The war in the Persian Gulf was a war about petroleum — who should have it, where they should get it, how it should be delivered, to whom it should be sold, and for how much. This was an oil war. The rhetoric of George Bush and Norman Schwartzkopf cannot make it otherwise.

My talk tonight is not about the Persian Gulf war. At least not directly. But it is about oil. At least indirectly. It is a talk about Jimmy Carter and what he tried to do about the problem of oil a dozen years ago. At that time, Mr. Carter warned us that oil would be our downfall unless we became smarter, that oil reserves were not reserved for our endless use, that our selfishness about oil was unseemly at best, suicidal at worst. Jimmy Carter wrapped all of these thoughts into one big enchilada of a speech but the American people could not, or would not, digest it. Perhaps as a result, when they fought their war in the Persian Gulf, the American people were required to eat Mr. Carter's words. Were it not for the grace of God and U.S. technology, their oil war could clearly have

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cost far more than the three hundred American lives it cost them. Twelve years ago, Jimmy Carter effectively predicted such a war. Tonight, I shall try to explain why the American people did not listen to him.

To do so, I shall take a circuitous route. Rather than travel from the United States to the Middle East to talk about oil, I shall continue on to the Far East itself, to China, and then back in time to certain ancient Chinese philosophers. Unquestionably, then, this talk is a cross-cultural experiment. It seeks a fresh understanding of modern, Western, political phenomena by examining them through ancient, Eastern, philosophical lenses. My remarks "break frame" in this manner in order to substitute new questions for old answers about the Carter administration. More specifically, I shall make two arguments: (1) the Confucian view of political leadership best explains the rather forlorn presidency of James Earl Carter and (2) Jimmy Carter's "Confucianism" presented an opportunity for governance missed by the American people.

These claims will be advanced by reflecting anew on a speech President Carter delivered on July 15, 1979. In that speech, the President declared that a "crisis of confidence" afflicted the American people and that only dissolution of a national malaise could set the country straight. Pilloried in most quarters, this address became a synecdoche for the entire Carter presidency, an administration given to too much thought and too little action. That is, Jimmy Carter's speech was not only politically ineffective but it was also culturally offensive to the American people. By refracting Carter's speech through certain Confucian notions of leadership, the source of this cultural offensiveness might be traced.

But the obvious must also be stated initially. Jimmy Carter was in no sense histori-



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1. For additional information on Carter's personal religious beliefs, see Wesley G. Pippert, "Jimmy Carter: My Personal Faith in God," *Christianity Today*, March 4, 1983, 14-21 and his *The Spiritual Journey of Jimmy Carter* (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

2. D.J. Munro, *The Concept of Man in Early China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 14.

cally "Eastern." Historically, his politics were thoroughly Western, as was his theology. Historically, Mr. Carter was a Niebuhr-influenced evangelical Christian¹ who taught Bible classes to children, who led prayer meetings among adult professionals, and whose dog-eared Bible was his constant companion. In addition, Mr. Carter's Naval Academy education and personal reading habits never really directed him to matters Eastern. While serving as president, he did meet with Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping, but their conversations turned theological only briefly — relative to the distribution of Bibles in Communist China.

Accordingly, when I argue here that Confucian perspectives best illuminate the Crisis of Confidence speech, I am going well outside Mr. Carter's own phenomenological experience. In that sense, this presentation is something of an academic exercise. But not all academic exercises are as dreary as that ominous phrase suggests. That is especially true in intercultural matters. After all, as the world grows smaller, as once-distant cultures come into contact, as the need for international understanding increases, and as traditional domestic perspectives on executive leadership become shopworn, an academic exercise or two might well be in order if it forces a reexamination of cultural assumptions and stimulates a good argument. This paper attempts to serve both purposes.

Rhetoric and Politics, East and West

Over twenty-four hundred years ago, Confucius wandered for more than a decade among the principalities of ancient China looking for a local leader willing to enact his principles of governance. He searched in vain. This essay asks the improbable question of whether Confucius would have been welcomed if Jimmy Carter had ruled one of those provinces. At first blush, such a question seems useless. "What if?" questions — especially "What if?" questions cutting across time, geography, language and cul-

ture — often seem silly. Indeed, in certain senses, an egalitarian like Jimmy Carter would have been a terrible host to a thinker like Confucius whose notions of hierarchy produced so many class-based rigidities lasting for so many hundred of years in the Orient. The "aristocracy of merit"² often associated with Confucian educational systems surely would have given Jimmy Carter pause. Mr. Carter might have observed, as had Marxist revisionists before him, that the Confucian treatises largely instantiated class-based divisions, that Confucius' views of leadership rationalized repressive political values, and that his feudal, agrarian model of politics is inappropriate in a modern, industrial democracy.

It is also true that most of the ancient Chinese commentaries on political leadership — whether Confucian, Taoist, or Legalist in orientation — posited a monarch with absolute power and differed only as to how that power was to be manifested. Indeed, even when endorsing comparatively dialogical notions of leadership, documents like *The Art of Rulership* really only endorsed simulated give-and-take, not the sort of sharp dialectic found in Western politics. So, for example, when describing the faintly interactional notion of "political purchase," such treatises reveal a benevolent, but undeniable, authoritarianism:

Now, even if Wu Huo or Chieh Fan were to attempt to lead an ox by the tail from behind, they would pull the tail off without budging the ox because they are acting contrary to the way of things. But if one were to pierce the ox's nose with a sprig of mulberry, even a half-grown boy could lead it around the country because he is following the way of things.

Because we harness the water for our use, with a seven-foot oar we can maneuver a boat. Because he takes the people as his purchase, the emperor has

only to issue commands to have them implemented and observed.³

Another sharp difference between Confucian political thought and that of a contemporary like Jimmy Carter has to do with the idealism of the former and the unmistakable empiricism of the latter. If politics was a branch of ethics for the ancient Chinese, it is a branch of economics for a modern U.S. president. Indeed, despite the somewhat philosophical tone of Carter's Crisis of Confidence speech, that speech also had a bottom line: energy supplies. True to his post-Enlightenment heritage, Jimmy Carter knew that whereas the Confucian "emphasis lies in spiritual development, not in material standards,"⁴ Americans become uncomfortable with interiorized politics. Raised on a diet of political activism, the American people expect their leaders to do much and also to know much. And they are expected, especially, to know thingness. Thus, the Confucian understanding of an indwelling leader is a foreign understanding for most Americans. Even during the faintly quietistic Hoover or Ford administrations, American voters could hardly have fathomed a political leader described thusly:

Therefore a king of antiquity would attach a veil of pearls to his cap to prevent himself from seeing too clearly (ming); he would have yellow silk plugs in his ears to prevent himself from hearing too keenly (ts'-ung). The emperor being surrounded by screens was to erect a barrier around himself (chang).⁵

Perhaps the sharpest difference between ancient Chinese thought and Western theories of governance centers on political activism. As has been shown elsewhere,⁶ the making of political rhetoric has become, at least in the United States, both the signal of modern leadership and often its substance as well. Jimmy Carter was no exception. Despite his avowed antipathy for the verbal arts, Mr. Carter reached out to audience after

audience during his tenure in office. He conducted more ceremonies, more press conferences, more town hall debates, and more meetings of special interest groups than virtually any of his predecessors in office.⁷ He did so out of a spartan sense of duty, not because he loved eloquence and surely not because he embodied it. Instead, he apparently reasoned that today's rhetoric would make up political ground lost yesterday and that tomorrow's rhetoric would sustain political ground not yet obviously threatened.

Despite Carter's actual behavior, anecdotal evidence suggests that he privately shared the anti-rhetorical sentiments found in ancient Chinese writings.⁸ Perhaps because of the monarchical, militaristic systems in which they lived and wrote, Chinese philosophers of every stripe decried the rhetorical arts. The Taoists, for example, did so because of their largely anarchic view of life: If a thing is to be it will be; it cannot be made to be and it most certainly cannot be made to be via the bedevilments of human invention. The Taoist notion of wu-wei (generally interpreted as "inaction") is seen as the natural way of things and rhetoric, by extension, is viewed as an artificial intervention into the natural life-flow. This does not make rhetoric immoral; it simply makes rhetoric irrelevant, ineffectual. A leader depending on rhetoric thus depends on an inherent falsity says the Taoist:

'The sage manages affairs without action, and spreads doctrines without words.' The natural way is to 'support all things in their natural state' and thus allow them to 'transform spontaneously.' In this manner, 'The Way invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone'... From this it is quite clear that the way of wu-wei is the way of spontaneity, to be contrasted with the artificial way, the way of cleverness and superficial morality.⁹

Another philosophical camp, the Legalists, also foreswore public discourse. Their

3. "Huai Nan Tzu, Book Nine: The Art of Rulership" in R.T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 197-8.

4. C-C. Liang, *History of Chinese Political Thought: During the Early Tsin Period*, trans. L.T. Chen (New York: Harcourt, 1930), 67.

5. "Huai Nan Tzu," 168.

6. J. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

7. For added detail see my book *The Sound of Leadership: Presidential Communication in the Modern Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

8. For particularly revealing commentaries see "Verdict from Experts," *U.S. News and World Report*, January 9, 1978, 18; T. Szulc, "Our Most Ineffectual Post-war President," *Saturday Review*, April 29, 1978, 10; "Carter's Year One," *National Review*, February 3, 1978, 134.

9. W-T Chan, "The Story of Chinese Philosophy," in *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. C.A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 40.

rejection sprang not from Taoist defeatism but was instead a repudiation of rhetoric's capacity to liberate human thought. Particularly disturbing to the Legalist were the dialectical possibilities of rhetoric — its capacity to promote genuine intellectual exchange. That is, even though it has been used by republican and tyrant alike, rhetoric has always been the surer friend of the republican and, hence, the natural enemy of the Legalists who advised the ancient Chinese emperors. In actual fact, ancient China (not to mention modern China) provided few genuine forums of public exchange, but even the incipient capacities of rhetoric to threaten extant power structures worried the Legalists. Thus, the most famous among them, Shan Yang, decried rhetoric's philosophical emptiness as well as the political destabilization it so often fosters:

When a ruler loves their sophistry and does not seek for their practical value, then the professional talkers have it all their own way, expound their crooked sophistries in the streets, their various groups become great crowds, and the people, seeing that they succeed in captivating kings, dukes, and great men all imitate them. Now if men form parties, the arguments and discussions in the country will be of confusing diversity; the lower classes will be amused and the great men will enjoy it, with the result that among such a people farmers will be few and those, who, in idleness, live on others will be many.... land will be left lying fallow. If study becomes popular, people will abandon agriculture and occupy themselves with debates, high-sounding words and discussions on false premises; ... people will seek to surpass one another with words. Thus the people will become estranged from the ruler and there will be crowds of disloyal subjects. This is a doctrine which leads to the impoverishment of

the state and to the weakening of the army.¹⁰

The third dominant tradition in classical China, **Confucianism**, also rejected rhetoric but its reasons for so doing were less political than the Legalist's and less fatalistic than the Taoist's. For the Confucians, human influence came from modeling virtue, not from actively soliciting people's minds and hearts. To become audience-conscious, they felt, was to abandon wu-wei and to glorify contrivance. In contrast, the ideal Confucian ruler should serve

as an example for others to emulate in the development of their own natures ... regulating his conduct so that his activities reflect a commitment to the expression of his moral nature ... The ruler 'does nothing' inasmuch as his personal cultivation, possible only through interaction with his people, does not require the projection of arbitrary demands on his subordinates. His relationship with these subordinates is characterized by a total absence of compulsion.¹¹

Naturally, the modern skeptic may well wonder what strategy a good Confucian was expected to use when interacting with subordinates or what artfulness would make that ruler seem neither arbitrary nor coercive. In the most popular Confucian commentaries, however, these questions were neither asked nor answered. Apparently, the Confucians, like some of their Platonic contemporaries in the West, preferred to be radically unconscious of their rhetorical natures. As a result, their rhetoric of anti-rhetoric served to purify them philosophically and, it must be mentioned, to mystify the process whereby so much temporal power came to be lodged in the hands of so few persons for so many centuries in China.

In short, classical Chinese thought eschewed pragmatism, political activism, and rhetorical exchange. Perhaps this establishes

10. Quoted in V.A. Rubin, *Individual and State in Ancient China: Essays on Four Chinese Philosophers*, trans. S.I. Levine (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 73.

11. R. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983), 29.

nothing more than that old is not new and that East is not West. But, we might ask, what would happen if these rival perspectives became oddly interlocked, as they seem to have become in the case of Jimmy Carter? Before attempting to answer that question, we must rethink what we know about Confucianism.

Some Tenets of Confucian Politics

For more than thirteen hundred years, Confucianism and Christianity have had numerous points of contact, largely through the influence of Christian missionaries. Moreover, one can sketch a number of abstract theological similarities between the two religions: the conjoining of thought and action in ethical life, the centrality of history to human experience, the importance of religious immanence in civil affairs, etc. But these abstractions evaporate rather quickly when the historical and political differences between East and West are factored into the cultural equation. Thus, despite certain theoretical points-of-nexus, the empirical gulf between Confucianism and Christianity has been one of the hardest truths of human history, a truth documented by philosophers¹² and church historians¹³ alike.

Even within the East, one must carefully distinguish between the Confucian perspective and its rivals — Taoism and Legalism. Put simply, Confucianism is the most "human" of these schools of thought, featuring as it does the unique personage of the ruler. Operating on the assumption that role-modeling is essential to social change, the Confucian *Analects* present vivid characterizations of worthy individuals and their exemplary behavior. As a result, education in general and the teacher in particular became central to the Confucian tradition. This lies in sharp contrast to the almost escapist worldview of the Taoist who emphasizes natural forces over those fashioned by human communities. In the Taoist vision, a vision that "idealizes the pristine ignorance and uncor-

rupted natural harmony of high antiquity,"¹⁴ people are seen as virtual intruders into the phenomenal world. Not surprisingly, the Taoist ideal therefore becomes "the state of the uncontaminated infant and the unhewn block of wood."¹⁵ Thus it was that the Taoist Chuang Tzu considered "knowledge to be the root of all evil. 'So the world is dulled and darkened by great confusion. The blame lies in this coveting of knowledge.'"¹⁶ Contrastingly, the Confucian fathers showed scant respect for "natural" differences among people and erected their institutions of learning (and methods of mass testing) to insure that any social hierarchies produced were the results of tutored human capacities.

The Legalists also downplayed the influence of human personality but did so for different reasons. They felt that the ideal leader blended indistinguishably into the institutional superstructure, thereby resisting superidentification with the people. Such a faintly sketched leader, they reasoned, would direct public scrutiny to the essence of government — the laws regulating human affairs — and have certain tactical advantages as well: The people will "have no knowledge of his actual limitations ... [and thereby] attribute powers to him far beyond his real capacities."¹⁷ A legal system thus set free of personality was also a system that could be maintained across time and circumstance. The Legalists felt that laws obeyed in the abstract would be obeyed in the instance as well.

Unlike the Legalists, the Confucians were not systems thinkers. They conceived of a simpler, more direct, and more personal relationship between governor and governed. As Mencius observed, "Just as the ruler and compass are the absolute standards of rectangles and circles, so the sages are the absolute standards of human relationships."¹⁸ For the Confucians, the ruler/teacher was the person of greatest virtue, a man of superior "moral potency" (te) whose

12. T.Y. Yeh, *Confucianism, Christianity, and China* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969).

13. R.R. Covell, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986).

14. Ames, 135.

15. Ames, 42.

16. Rubin, 110.

17. Ames, 52.

18. Quoted in Liang, 121.

19. Ames, 52.

20. L.S. Hsu, *The Political Philosophy of Confucianism* (London: Routledge, 1952), 51.

21. L.W. Pye, *The Spirit of Chinese Politics: A Psychoanalytical Study of the Authority Crisis in Political Development* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 29.

22. W.M. Tu, "Jen as a Living Metaphor in the Confucian *Analects*," *Philosophy East and West*, 31 (1981), 47.

23. Not all commentators agree about this matter of metaphysics. For a contrasting view see W.T. deBary, "Introduction," in *Principles and Practicality: Essays in Neo-Confucianism and Practical Learning*, ed. W.T. deBary and I. Bloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 5.

24. W.T. Chan, "Chinese Theory and Practice, with Special Reference to Humanism," in *The Chinese Mind: Essentials of Chinese Philosophy and Culture*, ed. C.A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), 17.

25. This is largely the viewpoint of Confucius himself. Stated this baldly, Confucian thought may seem naive politically, so surely does it ignore systemic remedies for maintaining social order. Later thinkers,

job was to emulate, to edify, to transform, and thus to govern.¹⁹ For the Confucian "The Empire is a great university; the people are the students; and the rulers are the instructors. Practical policies and administration are the lessons."²⁰

Confucian education was not the bloodless data-transmission often idealized in the scientific West. Rather, it tended to conflate the moral with the political, insisting "that the essence of government was to ensure that people were instructed in the proper civil virtues"²¹ and that only such moral commitment could produce civilized behavior. Such a stance placed great burdens on the political leader who not only had to model these qualities but who had to do so unobtrusively and with Confucian decorum. The ideal Confucian ruler eschewed pontification, trying to produce within his people an intersubjective validation of philosophical truths and communal values: "the *Analects* [are therefore] characterized not by the formula of the teacher speaking to the student but by the ethos in which the teacher answers in response to the student's concrete questioning."²²

Most commentators agree that Confucianism repudiates metaphysics when it insists that a political leader present constant behavioral evidence that he has understood and accepted Confucian premises.²³ Not surprisingly, then, traditional Confucianism produced few abstruse philosophical treatises and instead committed its truths to conversations, letters, and official documents. Also not surprising is that "most Chinese philosophers have been active men, and ... their philosophical works have been chiefly connected with actual living."²⁴ Since only purity of mind can insure purity of heart and since only purity of heart can produce correct behavior, Confucians therefore reject all forms of state compulsion, militarism, or control-by-intimidation. For them, only right thinking produces right living.²⁵

While the Legalists treated governance as something of a craft and whereas the Taoists treated it as something of an impossibility, the Confucians saw moral excellence and personal erudition as the keys to both leadership and citizenship. At its best, Confucian contemplativeness reduced to neither asceticism nor to solipsism. While Confucians understood that "the times" (*shih*) affected governmental affairs,²⁶ they felt that "superior men" affected much more. Quintessentially, therefore, Confucians were philosophers in action.

A brief summary of this sort hardly does justice to Confucian essentials. Any philosophical worldview with so storied a history produces as many exceptions as rules, as many questions as answers, as many revisionists as visionaries. Still, Confucianism does seem to endorse a certain political style that especially prizes these things: (1) reflective thought, (2) communal obligation, (3) mentorship, and (4) the possibilities of human growth. Other Eastern philosophies endorsed these features but rarely so insistently. Other Western philosophies touched upon them but rarely so integrally. The remainder of this essay will argue that Jimmy Carter, who probably never read the *Analects*, nevertheless echoed these same themes when serving as president of the United States. That he did not do so consciously seems assured. That he did not do so effectively cannot be denied. But that he attempted to do so at all may be a key to understanding who Jimmy Carter was, what Western political leadership is supposed to be, and what the American people think of themselves.

Jimmy Carter's Political Style

It is a damning commentary indeed that one must travel across the globe and back twenty centuries to find Jimmy Carter even half a home. And Confucianism is only half a home for Jimmy Carter, for there is much about him that is thoroughly Western. His

scientific education, his fundamentalist religion, his submarine experience, his business acumen, his can-do governorship, and his unexpected, individualistic campaign for the presidency of the United States in 1976 all earmarked Jimmy Carter as a true son of the West. To search for anything contemplatively Chinese in this hard-charging American may be foolhardy. But perhaps not, especially since the Crisis of Confidence speech proved so unusually distasteful to the American people. In rejecting that speech, the American people rejected much more as well: Carter's self-image as chief executive, his philosophical worldview, his style of communication, and, most centrally, his eclectic taste in models of leadership.

Inevitably, when scholars and citizens alike reflect upon the Carter administration, they isolate the Crisis of Confidence speech as symbolic of his failures. As one observer said, "Moralistic sermons about malaise were the last things one would have expected" from a leader in the aggressive, American tradition.²⁷ Other commentators were even less charitable about the Carter speech:

Joseph Kraft: The Jimmy Carter who came off the mountain Sunday night wasn't a president ready to make decisions, bite bullets and cut Gordian knots.²⁸

George Will: A satire of media politics, a broad-brush caricature of leadership.²⁹

Hugh Sidey: [Carter] has been almost as much a supplicant as an authority, a man searching for an elusive consensus in town halls and along Main Street. He has walked more among the people than ahead of them.³⁰

On the other hand, both during his administration and after it, opinion polls showed that most Americans still held Jimmy Carter in great personal esteem. Conceivably, this double-mindedness was a result of the "something else" Jimmy Carter brought to his job, a "something else" here being called his Confucian instincts. But is Confu-

cianism really necessary to explain Jimmy Carter's rhetorical failures? Are there no more familiar, more Western, explanations of his predicament? Is not Confucianism distorted unforgivably in service of such case-making?

In response to the first question, Confucianism seems as good a place to start as any since Jimmy Carter's style was so culturally alienating to the American people. In his Crisis of Confidence Speech, Mr. Carter was too theoretical for a practical people, too negative for an optimistic people, too tentative for an assured people, and too speculative for a people accustomed to quick fixes. Despite all of this, the American people might still have accepted Mr. Carter's attempt to save energy supplies and buoy the nation's spirits if his stratagem had worked. But it did not. By any standard, Mr. Carter was judged an obscure guide and his Crisis of Confidence speech a grand failure.

Are there more Western models to explain the Carter speech? What of the conventional explanation of Jimmy Carter as a political evangelist, a new Jonathan Edwards leading a sinful people out of a new wilderness? Hahn, for example, makes the case that Jimmy Carter's "energy sermon" was a political manifestation of Carter's personal religious impulses, that its pivotal language ("faith," "vision," "soul," "spirit," etc.) sprang from his confessional religious roots, and that his call for an American renaissance reflected the salvationist style of his rural Georgia background.³¹

One feature that Hahn omits, however, is a key feature of evangelical religion: ideology. And it is ideology that is so dramatically missing in Jimmy Carter's Crisis of Confidence speech, a speech that begins a discussion rather than ends one, a speech that is more dialectical than rhetorical. Admittedly, Mr. Carter had a case to make in his speech but his case did not grow out of an over-arching, doctrinal enjoiner. Philo-

especially Mencius and Hsun Tzu, added to Confucius' formulation by acknowledging that proper edification is sometimes not sufficient to insure social progress and tranquility. Munro (1969: 89, 111) observes that economic deprivation was treated as a much more powerful variable by these latter thinkers. They urged a wise leader to do everything in his power to minimize its disruptive influence.

26. B. Schwartz, "Some Polarities in Confucian Thought," in *Confucianism and Chinese Civilization*, ed. A.F. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 5.

27. M.J. Malbin, "Rhetoric and Leadership: A Look Backward at the Carter National Energy Plan," in *Both Ends of the Avenue: The Presidency, the Executive Branch, and Congress in the 1980s*, ed. A. King, (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1983), 238.

28. "Carter: A Candidate Again," *Washington Post*, July 17, 1979, p. A17.

29. "The Virtues of Boldness," *Newsweek*, July 23, 1979, p. A19.

30. "A Man Searching for Consensus," *Time*, July 23, 1979, p. 22.

30. D. Haines, "Flaming the President: Carter's Energy Speeches of 1979," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 10 (1980): 563-67.

31. "Jimmy the Persuader," *Nimrod*, March 19, 1979, 25.

32. B. Mazlish and E. Diamond, *Jimmy Carter: An Interpretive Biography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 264.

33. T. Hughes, "Carter and the Management of Contradictions," in *The Presidency: Studies in Policy Making*, ed. S. Shull and L. LeLoup (Brunswick, Oh.: Kings Court, 1979), 267.

sophically, it contained no positivistic mandate. Emotionally, it contained no soulful plea for redemption. Rhetorically, it contained no self-sealing zealotry of the true-believer sort. Instead, Mr. Carter presented a speculative panorama of ideas that retained some traditionally Western elements but also introduced a different style of thought to the American scene.

Was this style of thought Confucian? The remainder of this essay will argue that it was. In his speech, Jimmy Carter sought to teach. He did not teach well but he did teach doggedly. In doing so, he did not cast himself as a military hero or a daunting pioneer or a religious prophet. Such leaders are familiar to us and, in their fashion, they comfort us. Teachers, on the other hand, often do not. Teachers can threaten us psychically because they are adults when we are children; teachers can threaten us sociologically because they work with words rather than implements. Most of all, however, it was Jimmy Carter's comfort with the spirit of inquiry, his willingness to marry the certain with the uncertain, that made him seem strange.

But if Jimmy Carter was a teacher, why not a Western teacher? He was, after all, a fairly classic empiricist. Carter's aides report that the President had an "encyclopedic knowledge of issues, and his gift for almost total recall from his voluminous briefing books" made him a teacher to be feared.³² Even Mr. Carter acknowledged his tendency to get matters right rather than get them seductive. Said he on one occasion: "... the more simplistic an approach can be, the more the public can be aroused ... Although [a complex explanation] produces an appearance of confusion, in the long term I think it is good."³³ Unfortunately, Jimmy Carter's term was not a long term. Tried though he did, he was never able to make a teacher's presidency attractive: "Carter is unusually intelligent. He is extraordinarily hard-working. He tries to master subjects. The

problem is that that is not exactly what we pay our President to do."³⁴

In addition to his Western precision, there was also something Eastern about Jimmy Carter's teaching. Consider, for example, what he tried to do in July of 1979. Buffeted by rising energy costs, conflicting expert opinion, and a disastrous press image, Jimmy Carter abruptly canceled a nationwide address and repaired to the Catoctin Mountains in Maryland to reflect. While there, he conferred with some 130 local, state, and national governmental leaders, union officials, corporate heads, journalists, clergy, and academics. During these discussions, Mr. Carter mostly listened, taking copious notes on yellow legal pads. His research done, Carter then addressed the nation, telling his fellow citizens that they had become lost and that only a purging of the nation's soul would save them. Fully half of his speech was devoted to the crisis of confidence he sensed in the country and his remarks were often starkly personal. Yet judging by his audience's quizzical, if not hostile, reactions, no such speech will be given again by an American president. Even a cursory analysis will explain why.

The Speech Itself

In the history of the American presidency, there had never been a speech like Carter's. Deeply ruminative throughout, the speech was hard-hitting and pointed and yet neither cramped nor sectarian. Not only did it describe a national malaise but it also traced the roots of that malaise, searched out its manifestations, and imagined its consequences. Other presidents had attempted to teach the people (Woodrow Wilson on the League of Nations, Dwight Eisenhower on the military-industrial complex, Lyndon Johnson on the Voting Rights Act, Richard Nixon on relations with China), but none had attempted to do so as "philosophically." None had probed the nation's political, social, economic, technological, and psychic

fault lines simultaneously. In using a pedagogical style, Jimmy Carter inflicted a variety of political wounds upon himself — vacillation, impotence, even hubris in the eyes of some. But the Crisis of Confidence speech was too carefully crafted to suggest that Carter did not know what he was doing. For perhaps the first time in his presidency, he had found his natural voice. Here is what that voice said:

1. Teaching is an honorable activity. For the ancient Confucians, the best scholar-officials were "steeped in the classics and in history, shaped by stern family discipline, tempered by introspection, and sobered by their vast responsibilities ... [T]hese men were thought to have the power to transform their environment, to turn ordinary folk into the path of virtue."³⁵ To modern, Western ears, such a description sounds bloated: too self-serving and too self-important for an American leader. And yet this describes Jimmy Carter rather well, a person who in his speech traced historical truths ("For the first time in the history of our country a majority of our people believe that the next 5 years will be worse than the past 5 years"), who urged greater personal discipline ("The productivity of American workers is actually dropping"), and who was studiously introspective ("That's why I've worked hard to put my campaign promises into law — and I have to admit, with just mixed success.")³⁶

Mr. Carter also urged that the nation make the sort of "environmental" changes called for by the Confucians, arguing that the nation ought not content itself with temporary modifications of federal legislation. He spoke of "the social and the political fabric of America" as easily as he spoke of solar energy and shale oil.³⁷ He spoke, in short, like a teacher, like a person willing to be a bit airy, perhaps even a bit muddle-headed, so concerned was he with fundamental matters: "the true problems of our Nation are much deeper — deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or

recession."³⁸ Anticipating Jimmy Carter, perhaps, Confucius had counseled that the "path of virtue" was often unpopular but he urged the wise ruler to follow it nonetheless. Admittedly, Confucius had envisioned a more private trek toward virtue, not one begun before eighty million television viewers.

2. Education is a moral enterprise. This is one of the hardest propositions in Confucian thought. It argues that laws, bureaucracies, family strictures, social customs, and pure intellection cannot guide a people truly. Only moral learning can; only changes of the heart can. As Hsun Tzu said, "When the heart is anxious and afraid the mouth may hold fine food but it will not taste it; the ears may hear bells and drums, but they will not hear the music; the eyes may behold fine embroidery, but they will not see its pattern ..." ³⁹ Jimmy Carter's own remarks eerily resemble those of Hsun Tzu:

[T]oo many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.⁴⁰

These are not the sorts of statements normally made by a sitting president. They seem more suited to the Sunday pulpit than to the Oval Office. But this civil/religious distinction was no distinction at all for the ancient Confucians, who saw an integrity to the human spirit and who dismissed out of hand what would become forced compartmentalizations in the West.

The Confucians also rejected the Legalist assumption that laws somehow stand apart from the souls of the people. Thus, a Confucian like Jimmy Carter could easily affirm that "all the legislation in the world can't fix what's wrong with America."⁴¹ Unfortunate-

35. A.F. Wright, "Introduction," in *Confucianism and Chinese Civilization* ed. A.F. Wright (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), xi.

36. J. Carter, "Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals," July 15, 1979, *Weekly Compilations of Presidential Documents*, 15:29 (1979): 1236, 1237.

37. Carter, 1237.

38. Carter, 1235.

39. Quoted in H.G. Creel, *Chinese Thought: From Confucius to Mao Tse-Tung* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 128-9.

40. Carter, 1237.

41. Carter, 1236.

42 B. Aubrey Fisher, "Carter
Approved" (San Francisco
Chronicle), August
1, 1979, 27.

43 Wright, 16.

44 Carter, 1236.

45 Carter, 1241.

46 Carter, 49.

47 Carter, 1237.

ly for Mr. Carter, most Americans are not Confucians, which is why they could appreciate Eugene Kennedy's assessment of the Carter presidency: "Genuine leaders act, and they do so because they understand their people, they understand that the people will allow them to make mistakes but will not tolerate indecision, endless meditation, or an attempt to lay on them a style of moralizing as self-serving and inappropriate as that in a Somerset Maugham minister."⁴²

3. Genuine learning is organic. The Confucians placed a great deal of stock in education because they viewed the world holistically. They felt that teaching could make the mind right and that if the mind were right all else would follow. As Wright observes, the Confucians felt that "man was the principle agent of both harmony and disharmony. Out of ignorance or perversity, men could cause serious disruptions; by the application of knowledge, wisdom, and discipline, men could restore harmony."⁴³ In other words, unless one appreciates fundamental truths, one thrashes about in the day-to-day world, behaving fitfully. Learning, on the other hand, provides a symmetry for one's daily plan, a rationale for behaving in a particular way. This is why Jimmy Carter made what most wags felt was a patently naive assumption. He assumed that unless the soul of America were purged of its disharmonies, energy problems could never be solved. Carter felt that restoring national confidence (which he described as "the most important task we face"),⁴⁴ would turn the people's eyes away from empirical distractions and allow them to coalesce their intellectual and emotional resources.

Stated this baldly, Jimmy Carter's remarks do indeed sound naive, especially to a nation accustomed to treating things on a case-by-case basis. Molecular thinkers to the core, the America people are naturally suspicious of any Grand Synthesis. Counterculturally, however, that is exactly what

Jimmy Carter offered them when he said: "We can spend until we empty our treasuries and we may summon all the wonders of science. But we can succeed only if we tap our greatest resources — America's people, America's values, and America's confidence."⁴⁵

4. Teaching should be dialectical. A consistent theme in Confucian thought treats learning as a corrective, as a means of displacing error. A related theme is that social learning is genuinely possible, a belief not shared by most Legalists and Taoists. In the ideal learning situation, the teacher exposes both Good and Evil because both teacher and student possess "evaluating minds" theoretically capable of distinguishing between right and wrong.⁴⁶ Education attempts to make this a less theoretical matter, guaranteeing all persons (each of whom possesses the evaluating mind to the same degree) the ability to discover error and to turn away from it.

Such beliefs place great faith in the learner by assuming that he or she will welcome the dialectic and pursue it vigorously. Jimmy Carter's learners had no such disposition. They found the to-and-fro of his energy story confusing and they showed no interest in examining evil at such an essential level. In 1979, they knew they could not drive their cars as often as they pleased and that bothered them. But they thought it silly to relate such practical problems to macrosociology, even sillier to make something philosophical out of them. Most of all, they did not appreciate the tone of their President's remarks. They felt that he was searching too hard in too many places for Evil and that when he spoke of Goodness he became too preachy. Thus, when Mr. Carter mentioned "a great movement of humanity itself called democracy" they scratched their heads and when he spoke of a "crisis of the American spirit" they shifted in their seats uncomfortably.⁴⁷ Perhaps the American people did have the

"evaluating minds" needed to appreciate Carter's philosophizing but they seemed reluctant to use them.

5. Genuine teaching involves self-risk. Jimmy Carter's audience also seemed embarrassed by his speech. They were embarrassed when he read a long string of quotations criticizing his administration. They were embarrassed that a citizen would be moved to say "Mr. President, you are not leading this Nation — you're just managing the Government," embarrassed even further that Jimmy Carter would read his own job-evaluations in public.⁴⁸ They were embarrassed in the beginning of the speech when the leader of the free world declared "I need your help" and embarrassed at the end of the speech when he vowed to get it: "I will continue to travel this country to hear the people of America."⁴⁹

In some ways, Americans are Legalists: They prefer a merger of president and presidency, of person and institution. If their chief executive insists on being a teacher, they want him to at least be a teacher and not a fellow learner. In violating these expectations, Jimmy Carter followed his Confucian instincts. He behaved as if he knew that "in the Confucian tradition, teaching (chiao) and learning (hsueh) for both the teacher and the student are inseparable, indeed interchangeable."⁵⁰ He behaved as if he knew that all genuine learning must be self-learning if one is to recognize jen or righteousness. He behaved as if he knew that "the vigilant way of overcoming one's moral and spiritual 'sickness' is none other than constantly 'looking within.'"⁵¹ About one thing, however, the Confucian fathers and the American people agreed: Introspection is best done privately. Jimmy Carter disagreed.

6. In education, theory determines practice. Perhaps the most important job for the Confucian teacher was upholding the Doctrine of Rectification which insisted "that

words and actions ... correspond."⁵² For Confucius, this Doctrine was of utmost importance:

If names are not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language is not in accordance with the truth, affairs cannot be carried on to success. When affairs cannot be carried on to success, proprieties and music will not flourish. When proprieties and music do not flourish, punishments will not be properly administered. When punishments are not properly administered, the people do not know how to move hand or foot.⁵³

Following this Doctrine, the Confucian teacher urged students to question the suitability of their semantic maps for the territories in which they lived. More scrupulous than playful, the Confucian teacher was therefore something of a linguistic nag.

So was Jimmy Carter. His Crisis of Confidence speech is an extended rectification of names. In the speech, he revives the original meanings of such hallowed terms as "common good," "God's love," "American wisdom and courage" "sound as a dollar," "charter of peace," and "the lessons of our heritage." He argues that these concepts have become corrupted of late by the forces of hate and slothfulness and that their referents have become either vague or indeterminable. To counteract this drift, Carter calls for "honest answers, not easy answers" and "clear leadership, not false claims and evasiveness."⁵⁴ He rejects "a mistaken idea of freedom" in favor of "true freedom" and then exposes a series of national inconsistencies:

We were sure that ours was a nation of the ballot, not the bullet, until the murders of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. We were taught that our armies were always invincible and our causes were always just, only to suffer the agony of

48. Carter, 1235-6.

49. Carter, 1235, 1240.

50. Tu, 47.

51. Tu, 52.

52. Chan, "Chinese Theory and Practice," 15.

53. Quoted in Liang, 47.

54. Carter, 1238.

Vietnam. We respected the Presidency as a place of honor until the shock of Watergate.⁵⁵

To appreciate such semantic house-cleaning, one must be in a reflective mood. In July of 1979, the American people were in no such mood.

Conclusion

This brief analysis of Jimmy Carter's Crisis of Confidence speech has hardly established that America's thirty-ninth president was more Oriental than Occidental. There are, it seems, some intriguing parallels between Jimmy Carter's approach and those of the traditional Confucian teachers, but these are only approximate parallels and they are perhaps counterbalanced by the thoroughly Western motifs also found in the Carter speech (e.g., he ended his address by heralding the Nation's technological genius and its natural resources). Possibly, this presentation has taken unwarranted liberty with ancient Chinese thought by imagining what it would look like today in the West. Lost in this radical force-fitting may have been Confucianism's contemplative qualities, its philosophical subtleties, and its cultural markings. Nevertheless, these risks were taken because no other model seemed to explain as readily why so many Americans found Jimmy Carter's rhetoric so alienating.

And for me, at least, the Confucian model has explained why Jimmy Carter's Crisis of Confidence speech, a speech to which I was intuitively attracted, was such a colossal failure. It also showed that it was the teacher within me who responded so positively to the teacher within Jimmy Carter. A dozen years later, the Crisis of Confidence speech still haunts. Until now I have not been able to explain why. But I have come to realize that what appealed to me was Jimmy Carter's willingness to do what all scholars try to do: to go beyond conventional explanations of conventional problems, to reexamine old assumptions and to test new ones, to exam-

ine both pleasing and unpleasing data, to raise the level of social discourse, to risk being wrong. I was also attracted to Jimmy Carter's willingness to abandon (for once, at least) what is too often the nation's political argot: mindless scientism, self-conscious preening, vague anecdotalism, gratuitous hagiography, xenophobic breast-beating and several varieties of sycophancy and melodrama. I am thinking here, naturally, of Mr. Carter's successor-in-office.

In short, it seems to me that Jimmy Carter spoke truthfully on July 15, 1979. He said that the American people had become self-indulgent and consumption-minded. And they have, all too often. He said that the willingness to work hard and to bond with one's neighbors have deteriorated and he was in part right. He complained that the federal government had become isolated from the people it served, that special interest groups had a stranglehold on Congress, and that public service had, as a result, lost its luster as a career. About all of these things he seems correct. He was also right, and rather brave, to recount the underside of recent American history — the assassinations, Vietnam, Watergate — and to call them for what they were: stains on the Nation's honor. He was right to do what American presidents never do — admit mistakes — and he was right to cancel a speech when he had nothing to say. He was right to gather his own data patiently, to dialogue rather than pontificate, and to demonstrate the vulnerability that any scholar feels when trading in uncertain ideas. In short, with or without the guidance of Confucius, Jimmy Carter did the Nation and the office of the presidency a service when he invented his Crisis of Confidence speech. Other presidents have been far more eloquent, far more positive, and far more beguiling but they may have said fewer true things in eight years in office than Jimmy Carter said during what is surely the most curious little moment in American rhetorical history. ■