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Innocence Abroad: Jimmy Carter's Four Misconceptions

Tough rhetoric from the President followed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Yet questions persist

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On January 12, 1977, eight days before his inauguration as President, Jimmy Carter was briefed by Washington's leading military and national-security experts. Carter asked if studies had been made on how a major reduction of long-range missiles would affect the U.S.-Soviet military balance.

Gen. George Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, quickly responded, "Oh, yes, Governor." He referred to studies that analyzed a reduction of long-range missiles from the proposed SALT II level of about 2400 to perhaps 2000 or so. This was considered a radical cutback. "I'm not talking about 2000, General," Carter replied in his soft Georgia accent. "I'm talking about 200 or 300."

Silence followed. Finally Harold Brown, Carter's incoming Secretary of Defense, pointed out that such an immense reduction in America's strategic arsenal would pose a fundamental risk to the nation's security, all but destroying the U.S. nuclear "shield." It would also expose Europe to the Soviet Union's vast superiority in conventional arms.

Carter's pre-inaugural interest in radically reducing the U.S. arsenal set a pattern that persisted until the Soviet military takeover of Afghanistan last December. It was born of a peculiar innocence, coupled with genuine self-confidence. His experience as a junior Naval officer, Carter felt, established his military expertise; in the two years after his single term as governor of Georgia, his membership on the newly formed Trilateral Commission convinced him that his agile mind had mastered the great game of diplomacy.

Others were not so sure. The trouble with Carter, Henry Kissinger told a friend early in the Carter Administration, was not that he did not understand foreign affairs, but that he did not understand that he did not understand.

Jimmy Carter is by no means the solitary author of the present weakened state of U.S. foreign policy. Toward the end of the Vietnam war and in the years that followed, Democratic Congresses began slashing away at the defense budget. Republican Presidents timidly accepted this. Nevertheless, our increasing vulnerability derives very substantially from the steady reinforcement of four basic misconceptions that Carter carried into office with him:

Misconception No. 1: The Cold War is over. The pronouncement was made four months after the inauguration in Carter's commencement address at Notre Dame University: "Confident of our own future, we are now free of *that inordinate fear of communism,* which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in our fear."

In giving voice to this innocence he was merely endorsing the then popular sentiment that ideological conflict between democratic America and totalitarian Russia was no longer relevant. That view prevailed among such foreign-policy advisers as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, chief disarmament negotiator Paul Warnke and Marshall Shulman, Vance's resident Soviet expert.

The only dissenter within the Administration was National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, who harbored no illusions about the Cold War being ended. But he was surrounded by adversaries, and he lacked both bureaucratic skill and Oval Office backing. Brzezinski did not even control the critical function of naming his own National Security Council staff.

Meanwhile, Carter was developing a peculiar empathy for Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev. He seemed to view Brezhnev as a fellow politician harassed by pressure groups, rather than as the master of Russia who had sent his legions rolling into Czechoslovakia a decade earlier.

Nor was he prepared to dwell on Soviet violations of détente. When a military junta seized power in Afghanistan in April 1978, one of the President's national-security aides handed a reporter highly confidential information about close ties between the Soviet Union and the leaders of the junta. It proved that rivers of blood had flowed in their seizure of power. The reporter's question was obvious: "Why doesn't the State Department publicly reveal these facts?" "Because," the bureaucrat replied with bitter sarcasm, "it is afraid the Soviets might not accept our next concession."

Those "concessions" were being made in the SALT negotiations. Nobody pretended that this was an equitable step toward arms control, but key Carter aides insisted that the "process" must be maintained. "I would like to say to you," Carter told a joint session of Congress on June 18, 1979, following the signing of SALT II, "that President Brezhnev and I developed a better sense of each other as leaders and as men. . . . I believe that together we laid a foundation on which we can build a more stable relationship between our two countries."

The Soviet sweep into Afghanistan was only six months away.

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Misconception No. 2: Military spending can and should be reduced. When Carter pledged in his 1976 campaign that "we can reduce present defense expenditures by about $5 billion to $7 billion annually," he was merely registering the Democratic Party's post-Vietnam consensus of "reordering priorities." That consensus, in turn, reflected the loathing of all things military that grew out of Vietnam. By deed, though not by word, Carter soon began to accept the argument of many advisers that a nation's arsenal could become too great for its own good.

Although a cutback of $5 to $7 billion a year in "present" defense spending was patently impossible, Carter moved in that direction. On June 30, 1977, he announced opposition to the new B-1 bomber. On April 3, 1978, he deferred production of the neutron warhead. On August 17, 1978, he vetoed Congressional authorization of a nuclear aircraft carrier. In 1979, he delayed production on the cruise-missile, the Trident-submarine and the SSN-688 attack-submarine programs. The Trident II missile system was postponed.

In his first three years in the White House, he cut $38 billion from spending called for by President Gerald Ford's last five-year defense program. Naval shipbuilding languished. Development was delayed of a mobile-basing system for the MX missile to protect the U.S. land-based deterrent from the dramatically improved accuracy of the big Soviet missiles. Aircraft production did not even cover attrition. Morale declined as pay for experienced technicians and officers lagged well behind inflation.

All of this overlooked two hard facts of life: first, that ever since Russia's humiliation in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, the Soviet Union had been carrying on the greatest peacetime arms buildup in the history of man; second, that U.S. military might had suffered by financing the Vietnam war through the deferral of vital weapons modernization.

Not until defense-oriented Senators tied their support for ratification of SALT II to higher defense spending did Carter change his public tune—a change now dramatically accelerated by the Afghanistan invasion. Even so, Carter's new proposals cannot possibly catch up with original military plans until 1985 at the earliest and, given Soviet weapons progress, even then we will fall far short of attaining parity with the Russians. Moreover, danger persists that the mixture of rising inflation and rising pressure to balance the 1981 budget will reverse Carter's pledge to increase defense spending, despite all the bold talk.

Misconception No. 3: Human rights must be the cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy. Carter made clear from the start that his crusade for human rights was directed not just at the Soviet Union but against "any dictator who joined us" in our "inordinate fear of communism." That inevitably led him into a policy of maximum U.S. pressure against friendly tyrants. At the same time, Soviet experts in the State Department gradually subdued Carter's human-rights pressure against Moscow, for the sake of détente.

The damage to long-standing U.S. relationships came quickly. Brazil canceled a 25-year-old military-assistance treaty with the United States. American relations with Argentina and Chile deteriorated.

The peak of human-rights zealotry came last year in Nicaragua and Iran. The result in Nicaragua is a pro-Marxist regime that did not even join the United States and the vast majority of the United Nations General Assembly in condemning Soviet aggression in Afghanistan. The result in Iran is Ayatollah Khomeini and anguished months of humiliation for the United States.

Misconception No. 4: In the new world, there is no need for covert intelligence activity. The men brought into high office by Carter had come to regard the CIA's great feats of the 1950s—the overthrow of a pro-communist regime in Guatemala and the restoration of the Shah in Iran—as cause for shame. Carter said at Notre Dame, "For too many years, we have been willing to adopt the flawed principles and tactics of our adversaries, sometimes abandoning our values for theirs."

Carter decided not to retain George Bush as CIA director but instead to single out for that job a leading critic of the intelligence system, Theodore C. Sorensen. When the Senate forced Carter to withdraw Sorensen's name, he responded with a man far less controversial: Adm. Stansfield Turner, an old Annapolis classmate with excellent brains but faulty judgment.

Turner began by summarily abolishing 820 jobs in the clandestine service. His callous order forced out men and women with priceless and irreplaceable expertise. Some of these operatives were in mid-career and ineligible for retirement pay. Morale plummeted and many of the best CIA personnel have since quit in disgust. Among Turner's casualties: the agency's top experts in counter-insurgency, in Iran, the People's Republic of China, the Kremlin power structure and the vital Middle East.

Combine that with Congressional shackling of covert operations, and it is no wonder Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D., N.Y.) suggested that the analytical functions now left to the CIA might well be performed by

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the Library of Congress. He was exaggerating only a little. The CIA has ceased to function as the intelligence service of a great power. It cannot even aid anti-communist insurgencies in Angola and Afghanistan.

WITH U.S. DIPLOMATS imprisoned for months as hostages in their own embassy in Teheran, and with Soviet troops pouring into Afghanistan, Jimmy Carter began re-election year 1980 by appearing to reject each of his misconceptions. He forthrightly confessed after the Afghan invasion, "My opinion of the Russians has changed more drastically in the last week than in even the previous 2½ years." He re-declared the Cold War with his pronouncement of the "Carter Doctrine," guaranteeing the territorial integrity of Persian Gulf nations; he set aside his cherished SALT II; he raised defense spending; he began to unshackle intelligence and counter-intelligence activities.

Yet, questions persist: Why are negotiations with the Soviet Union on European force reductions and on a comprehensive nuclear-test-ban treaty continuing? Why is the SALT II Treaty still on the Senate calendar? Why is the Office of Management and Budget still resisting desperately needed programs such as Naval modernization and career-pay improvements? Why are the B-1 and the neutron warhead still in mothballs, the fate of the MX mobile missile still uncertain? Why is the old team of top Carter advisers still on the job if its policies had been wrong and now appear rejected?

And, finally, can a rational person explain, much less excuse, the incompetence demonstrated when Carter disavowed the recorded U.S. vote in the U.N. Security Council in the bizarre matter of Israel's settlements policy? Such sophomoric antics would be funny as slapstick comedy if they did not tear away at the confidence and credibility of the presumed leader of the West.

The early innocence may be gone, but what has replaced it? Tough rhetoric makes good headlines, but there is abiding reason to doubt whether the old misconceptions have truly been swept away.

NEXT MONTH in The Reader's Digest, Roving Editor William E. Griffith, political-science professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, will spell out the changes in U.S. policy that are necessary to check new expansionist thrusts by the Soviet Union.