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The Domestic Politics of War and Peace

Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan,
and the Election of 1980

Robert Mason

On October 28, 1980, Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan met in Cleveland, Ohio, for the only presidential debate of the campaign between the two major-party candidates. Election Day was just a week away, and opinion polls suggested that both had a chance of victory. According to the latest Gallup poll, the president had moved ahead of the former California governor by 45 to 42 percent; the Louis Harris poll had the same numbers but Reagan ahead of Carter.¹ In both camps (especially the president's), there were aides who were not sure that participation in the debate was a wise move, but both candidates were confident in their ability to outperform their opponent.²

It would be Reagan whose confidence proved to be the more prescient. In his closing statement, he memorably pushed forward two key charges against Carter's record, one based on economic performance, and one involving foreign policy. "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" Reagan asked Americans. He alluded to inflation and mentioned unemployment—two pressing problems at home. He looked overseas as well: "Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do you feel that our security is as safe, that we're as strong as we were four years

ago?” Just as memorably, in trying to advance one of his main arguments against Reagan—that Reagan was unlikely to be effective as president in maintaining peace—Carter had misfired, noting that he had asked his thirteen-year-old daughter Amy what “the most important issue” was; her response, the president said, was “nuclear weaponry and the control of nuclear arms.”³ Carter’s supporters in the audience groaned; a panel of voters convened by the *New York Times* to discuss the debate erupted in laughter.⁴

At the polls a week later, Americans gave the victory to Reagan, unexpectedly by a landslide. In the popular vote, his margin over Carter was 50.8 to 41.0 percent; John B. Anderson, a disillusioned liberal Republican running as an independent, picked up 6.6 percent. Republican success in winning control of the Senate for the first time since 1952, together with gains in the House of Representatives, further encouraged the view that the 1980 elections marked a turn toward conservatism, perhaps even a realignment and the start of a new Republican-dominated era in American politics. This was an election in which foreign policy played a complex role, wrapped in perceptions of American decline. First, the background to the contest was a significant shift in public opinion on foreign policy, which became more supportive of interventionism. Second, the Carter years witnessed a conservative revitalization that was partly grounded in a critique of apparent decline. And, third, as the White House incumbent at a time of economic challenges, Carter saw foreign policy as presenting his most promising case for reelection. All these factors boosted the significance of foreign policy in the presidential contest even if the domestic dimension of decline—such as high unemployment and high inflation—probably retained more influence on the outcome. This did not amount to an electoral realignment, but it did signal a desire for a new direction both at home and overseas.

Foreign Policy in 1980

Election Day in 1980 was the one-year anniversary of a landmark event for the United States overseas. On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students took sixty-six Americans hostage at the US embassy in Tehran; a year later, as Americans went to the polls to choose among Carter, Reagan, and Anderson, fifty-two hostages remained in captivity. It was against the

backdrop of the hostage crisis that the 1980 presidential campaign took place. The crisis at first fostered support for Jimmy Carter in a striking example of the rally-'round-the-flag effect but in time raised questions about his leadership.⁵ Vividly and painfully exemplifying the limits of US power overseas, the hostage crisis fed a resurgence in patriotic sentiment. As they followed the events, "most [Americans]," the historian David Farber writes, "became increasingly certain of one thing: the United States had lost its way—economically, culturally, politically, and even militarily." Despite the political cynicism that had taken hold during the 1970s in the shadow of Vietnam and Watergate, "Americans demonstrated both a sometimes fierce, even xenophobic nationalism and an emotional bond to their fellow Americans held captive in Iran."⁶

As Farber's observation suggests, setbacks in foreign policy were far from the only aspect of the country's problems under debate during the 1980 campaign. The fortunes of the economy were especially salient. In real terms, family income on average was 5 percent lower in 1980 than it was on Carter's arrival in the White House.⁷ Inflation was high (running at more than 12 percent for 1980), and so was unemployment (eight million), together generating the challenge of "stagflation"; in early 1980, the "misery index" that added together the inflation and the unemployment rates reached its highest level since 1932, before easing somewhat. Under Carter, moreover, the country had experienced "the highest interest rates since the Civil War," Reagan noted, and the prime rate stood at 15.5 percent on Election Day. Especially because of the energy crisis—which involved a new dependence on foreign oil and which Carter labeled "the moral equivalent of war"—these economic challenges had a foreign dimension.⁸

Despite the personal impact of stagflation for many Americans, foreign policy was frequently at the forefront of political debate in 1980. Reagan often observed: "What this Administration has done to the domestic economy is infinitesimal [compared] to what has been done on the international scene to this country of which we were once so proud."⁹ Such charges promoted the significance of foreign policy, but Carter and his supporters also played an important role in this regard, believing that this was a debate that favored their cause. "Foreign policy was involved more prominently throughout the campaign than inflation," noted the scholar Jonathan Moore soon after the election, "and it played a more explicit role

in the behavior of candidates and the media.”¹⁰ The economic challenges facing the United States nevertheless ensured that the salience of unemployment and inflation eclipsed that of foreign policy.¹¹ A Reagan aide remarked: “The media are more interested in [the war-and-peace issue] than the people themselves are.”¹² Still, this is not to say that international questions were unimportant. A University of Michigan study of public opinion reported that, while 56 percent of voters said that the most important issue was the economy, almost one in three named defense as the most important issue—a much higher proportion than in 1976.¹³ According to Stephen Hess and Michael Nelson, a survey of presidential elections from 1952 to 1984 suggests that the 1980 contest was one of three in which foreign policy played “a significant role in the electorate’s decision process,” even if nonforeign issues were more important.¹⁴

It was not only the hostage crisis that fed this concern about foreign policy; in December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, creating a situation that Carter named “the most serious foreign-policy crisis since World War II.”¹⁵ In making such a comment, Carter succumbed to hyperbole, but the invasion’s political consequences were indeed significant. “The invasion of Afghanistan and its political aftermath,” notes the historian Julian Zelizer, “ended a decade-long quest among Democrats and moderate Republicans for a centrist national security agenda.”¹⁶ That quest had first, under Richard Nixon and then Gerald Ford, involved détente and a stress on negotiation with the Soviet Union; on the Democratic side, it then extended to Jimmy Carter’s emphasis on human rights as a defining characteristic of American foreign policy after Vietnam. “The defeat of the center in national security politics during the 1970s,” Zelizer concludes, “was a defining moment in the history of modern conservatism.”¹⁷ This moment had implications for party politics and for policy making; while divisions on foreign policy deepened within the Democratic Party, the decline of détente fostered new unity among Republicans.

The post-Vietnam years had been a period of transition in public opinion on foreign policy if also a period of public unconcern, relatively speaking, about international and defense matters.¹⁸ The Vietnam War had generated wariness of and skepticism toward American intervention overseas, but the foreign policy challenges of the Carter years encouraged a shift from dovishness to hawkishness. Hostility toward the Soviet Union, concern about the Cold War standing of the United States, and

support for higher spending on defense were all on the increase. Polls suggested, for example, that in 1973 only about one in five Americans held a highly unfavorable view of the Soviet Union, but the proportion was one in three by 1980. "By the time of the 1980 presidential election," the pollsters Daniel Yankelovich and Larry Kaagan noted, "fearing that America was losing control over its foreign affairs, voters were more than ready to exorcise the ghost of Vietnam and replace it with a new posture of American assertiveness."¹⁹ When Carter's pollster Patrick Caddell conducted interview research about attitudes on arms limitation, he reported "a general concern" about foreign and defense questions: "*Nothing in our structured quantitative research prepared us for the below surface anxiety and concern over these issues that the open end interviews revealed,*" he wrote.²⁰ Yet, although Carter's record in foreign policy and his management of the hostage crisis in particular fostered dissatisfaction with his administration, most Americans remained generally supportive of his measured and cautious approach to that crisis. An October poll, moreover, gave him a 53 to 52 percent edge over Reagan as the candidate "best able to keep us out of war."²¹

While the hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan encouraged public concern about America's world standing, these developments did not initiate but merely confirmed a conservative trend in opinion on foreign policy that had been building during the second half of the 1970s. "For those who wish to argue that the 1980 election really was preceded by a shift to the right," writes the political scientist William G. Mayer, "attitudes about foreign policy must clearly rank as Exhibit A."²² For Mayer, this evolution in public opinion is significant especially because a rightward shift is not similarly visible in other policy areas, such as economic/welfare issues and social issues. According to Gallup, the number of voters describing themselves as right of center was no higher in 1980 than in 1976, and Louis Harris noted a decline since 1968 in the number of self-identified conservatives.²³

The Conservative Resurgence

Concerns about American weakness overseas, together with economic and cultural themes, helped inform the organizational and intellectual resurgence of conservatism during the 1970s. Staunch anticommunism had

been a founding characteristic of modern American conservatism during the 1950s, and then Barry Goldwater's quest for the presidency in 1964 partly rested on a fundamental critique of existing Cold War policy—which his opponents (among Republicans as well as Democrats) branded, all too successfully, as dangerous and irresponsible. During the Nixon administration, conservative dissatisfaction with the policies of *détente* and especially with the opening to China was great enough that a group of leading figures on the Right supported an insurgent challenge, by Representative John Ashbrook of Ohio, to Nixon's renomination in 1972. Four years later, Ronald Reagan found that attacks on *détente* energized Republican support for his challenge to Gerald Ford for the presidential nomination more powerfully than did other issues.²⁴

Among Reagan's most wounding attack lines targeting Ford in 1976 was one that questioned the administration's negotiations on the future of the Panama Canal Zone. "When it comes to the Canal," Reagan said, "we built it, we paid for it, it's ours, and we should tell [Panamanian dictator Omar] Torrijos and Company that we are going to keep it!" In November 1977, Richard Viguerie, a leading figure of the "New Right," called the question of the Canal treaty's ratification, somewhat hyperbolically, "the most electrifying issue conservatives have ever had."²⁵ New Right organizations energetically pursued an antiratification campaign that added 400,000 names to the lists that Viguerie maintained to support their signature tactic of direct mail. Anticommunism also mobilized conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists; criticizing the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT)—which led to the SALT II Treaty, signed in June 1979—Sandra Ostby of Christian Voice explained that this was a position that formed "part of our attitude toward godless communism."²⁶ The decline of *détente* and the foreign policy travails of the Carter administration not only buoyed the organizational revitalization of conservatism but also fostered unity on the Right both within and beyond the Republican Party. Whereas moderate Republicans had opposed Goldwater on Cold War policy and conservative Republicans had challenged Nixon on *détente*, a new degree of agreement was now visible.²⁷

Grassroots mobilization in support of a conservative foreign policy alternative found voice when in 1978 the New Right supported challenges to congressional supporters of the Canal treaties, both in primaries and in general elections. This signature issue of a new conservatism in foreign

policy apparently proved less powerful than its promoters claimed, however. It seemed significant only in Gordon Humphrey's defeat of Senator Tom McIntyre in New Hampshire and, later, in 1980, in John P. East's defeat of Senator Robert B. Morgan in North Carolina.²⁸ As the political scientist Byron Shafer notes, the presidency has more relevance to foreign policy than Congress does, and this institutional fact has consequences for electoral politics—diminishing the likelihood that a question of foreign policy shapes outcomes in congressional elections while maximizing its impact in contests for the White House.²⁹

Among the sternest critics of Carter's foreign policy were neoconservatives. Neoconservatives were in most cases formerly loyal Democrats who now believed that, in the aftermath of Vietnam, the party was drifting toward a policy of weakness against the expansionist threat of communism. The Coalition for a Democratic Majority, established at the end of 1972 in the aftermath of Richard Nixon's landslide victory, sought to mobilize centrist Democrats against the "New Politics" associated with McGovern. While neoconservatism had first emerged mostly in criticism of Great Society liberalism at home, in the 1970s neoconservatives increasingly concentrated on foreign policy. The historian Justin Vaïsse identifies a fivefold agenda that pushed them to dissent during the Carter years, despite the post-Afghan invasion turn to toughness: to defend democracy; to promote human rights; to assert America's military power; to support Israel; and to attach less significance to multilateralism and the United Nations. This led to what Vaïsse labels a "migration" to the right, against Carter and in support of Reagan on foreign policy, within neoconservatism. Neoconservatives did not necessarily voice this support publicly, and some would return to the Democratic fold, but the transition was consequential in the long term for conservatism and for the Republican Party's approach to foreign policy.³⁰ Although neoconservative dissatisfaction with Carter was an elite response to trends within the Democratic Party, in fashioning an appeal to a wider public Reagan harnessed the claim that the administration—"dominated . . . by the McGovernite wing of the party"—had turned away from Democratic Party tradition. "I do not believe," he said, "this administration's defense policies are representative of the thinking of millions of rank-and-file Democratic Party members."³¹

Yet the new conservatism carried dangers as well as advantages. The ardent anticommunism that inspired conservative activism threatened

to alienate voters of a more moderate stripe. As he prepared his presidential campaign, Ronald Reagan was careful to restrain his rhetoric; in mid-1979, the *New York Times* noted that he offered “a calm, reasoned, and even dull speech.”³² The goal to avoid an extremist tag animated the Reagan campaign. Reagan’s pollster Richard Wirthlin wrote in March 1980: “We must position the Governor, in these early stages, so that he is viewed as less dangerous in the foreign affairs area, more competent in the economic area, more compassionate on the domestic issues and less of a conservative zealot than his opponents and the press now paint him to be.”³³ On the campaign trail, Reagan projected a message of “peace through strength” that synthesized the case for military buildup with the claim that such policies made war less likely, not more likely.³⁴ A study by Kiron K. Skinner, Serhiy Kudelia, Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, and Condoleezza Rice concludes that Reagan’s message posed a challenge to existing assumptions of Cold War policy: “Reagan was campaigning on the radical notion that the American conventions of containment and deterrence were wrongheaded and had relegated the country to second-place status.”³⁵ The Carter administration, Reagan said, was “totally oblivious” to Communist expansionism, offering a response “of weakness, inconsistency, vacillation and bluff.” What he promised instead was a “prudent and measured” buildup of national defenses, alongside an emphasis on the need for negotiation with the Soviet Union.³⁶ He stressed, too, a commitment to “a balanced and equitable arms limitation agreement,” which stronger defenses would facilitate: “The way to avoid an arms race is not simply to let the Soviets race ahead.”³⁷

Carter’s Foreign Policy Challenges

If Reagan used his candidacy to advance an argument about Cold War policy, then the administration’s difficult record shaped Jimmy Carter’s quest to retain the White House. In 1979, Carter reached new depths of popularity, his Gallup ratings even worse than Richard Nixon’s had been just before his resignation.³⁸ The focus of public dissatisfaction involved the country’s economic travails—high unemployment, high inflation, high energy prices—together with the perception that Carter was a weak, ineffectual leader. Foreign policy was not, directly, a factor. Yet the CBS/*New York Times* poll only once reported majority approval

of Carter's conduct of foreign policy, which was in response to the Camp David accords of September 1978.³⁹ Paradoxically, pollsters reported support for the constituent elements of Carter's foreign policy, including not only Middle East peace efforts but also talks on arms limitation with the Soviet Union, increases in defense spending, and diplomatic recognition of China. Connected with this dissatisfaction was a widespread belief that America's standing in the world was poor and weakening.⁴⁰ Believing that the Democrats' old New Deal coalition was crumbling, Carter thought that conservative aspects of his agenda, including increased spending on defense, might complement its liberal aspects, including arms control and his human rights focus, and offer "hopes of building upon the old Democratic coalition and broadening it somewhat."⁴¹

Carter's response to foreign policy challenges delivered electoral benefits in boosting his ability to withstand a challenge to his renomination from Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts. Formally launching his candidacy just two days after the seizure of the hostages, Kennedy first experienced difficulty in criticizing Carter, who was initially the beneficiary of a significant rally-round-the-flag effect. When, in early December, Kennedy questioned Carter's decision to allow Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the deposed shah, to enter the United States for medical treatment, the public response was hostile. Carter announced that he would not engage in nomination politics and instead concentrate on his White House duties; while initially the results were beneficial in boosting his ratings for presidential leadership, over time, as overseas crises and domestic problems persisted and accumulated, the Kennedy challenge gained force. He won a series of states that included Michigan, New York, and Pennsylvania, adding, on the last day of primary season, California and New Jersey.⁴² Even though Carter survived the Kennedy challenge, the wounds inflicted by party division were lasting. "My main handicap for re-election," Carter later said, "came from the liberal wing of the Democratic party"—mobilized by the Kennedy candidacy.⁴³ According to the Carter aide Hamilton Jordan, that candidacy "was the single critical factor in [Carter's] defeat."⁴⁴

The challenges in foreign policy that Carter faced encouraged him to move away from his stress on human rights and toward an emphasis on toughness. Soon after the Afghan invasion, he withdrew the controversy-beset SALT II agreement from Senate consideration. Then, in

July 1980, he signed Presidential Directive 59 (PD-59), which called for a buildup in nuclear arms and sought to replace the doctrine of mutually assured destruction that had long informed the country's nuclear policy as a response to the Soviet Union's enhanced ability to engage in limited warfare against military targets. Soviet officials interpreted PD-59 as one among other developments signaling a new era of confrontation in the Cold War; at home, some saw it as a political response to the charge in the Republican platform that administration policy offered "a Hobson's choice between mass mutual suicide and surrender."⁴⁵ Even though the president now supported increased spending on defense, a position in line with public sentiment, many believed that he did not—exemplifying the depth of the perception that he was weak on defense.⁴⁶

An incumbent's bid for reelection usually relies on, most of all, a referendum on the record. Because voters saw the president's record as weak, the Carter campaign sought to define the contest not as a referendum but as a choice between two candidacies, stressing that the Republican challenger was unqualified for the White House. The effort to place Reagan's putative inadequacies at the heart of the campaign often involved foreign policy because this was potentially the most wounding attack on his qualifications to be president. Although Carter's response to overseas crises had boosted his standing, by summer 1980 this hardly represented a strong argument for his reelection. "To the public," Caddell noted in June, "American foreign policy appears in disarray—the hostages are still captive, the Russians seem on the move and while there is a deep apprehension over armed conflict, a sense of political and military decline pervades the public mood."⁴⁷ Polls conducted after the Republican national convention in July gave Reagan a two-to-one edge over Carter.⁴⁸ Yet, if Carter succeeded in pushing Reagan on the defensive over the issue of peace and war as "the central issue of the campaign, the guy loses big," an aide said in September—by which time Carter had taken the lead.⁴⁹ Surveying presidential contests between 1956 and 1988, the political scientist John Kenneth White notes that Carter's success in achieving better poll ratings on foreign policy than his Republican rival was unusual for a Democrat during the Cold War era—an achievement bettered only by Lyndon Johnson in 1964.⁵⁰

Carter's acceptance speech, at New York's Madison Square Garden in August, signaled the thrust of attack. He said that victory for Rea-

gan posed “the risk of an uncontrollable, unaffordable, and unwinnable nuclear arms race” and an “alarming, even perilous destiny.” On the campaign trail, he made the point yet more starkly, observing that the election “will help to decide *whether we have war or peace*,” and noting that voters faced “an awesome choice.”⁵¹ Opening his campaign against Reagan on Labor Day in Tuscumbia, Alabama, he connected the message with an effort to maintain the support of his native South. “We southerners believe in the nobility of courage on the battlefield,” he said. “And because we understand the costs of war, we also believe in the nobility of peace.”⁵² Reagan’s policies, he said in early October, were “an excellent way to lead our country toward war.”⁵³ Carter claimed that Reagan showed a “repeated habit” of advocating American military intervention “when the obvious judgment made by [Carter himself] and by Nixon and Ford and Johnson and Kennedy and Eisenhower and Truman has been to avoid conflicts.”⁵⁴ Complementing this “trigger-happy” charge was the claim that, as president, Reagan would also foment division at home.⁵⁵

The aggression of Carter’s anti-Reagan rhetoric seemed counterproductive, precipitating a charge of meanness, and helping undermine the positive personal evaluations that were among his strengths. According to Reagan, Carter was “reaching a point of hysteria that is hard to understand”; he said that he “was deeply saddened . . . that the President would stoop so low.” According to Richard Wirthlin: “If we had tried to use our advertising to depict him as dishonest and mean, we could not have done the job he did on himself.”⁵⁶ Yet Carter seemed to have few other options; fostering doubt about Reagan on foreign policy was a key strand of his strategy. Nevertheless, when leading Carter surrogates had attempted to carry the message, the efforts had secured little attention and therefore had had little impact. While the meanness charge elicited a pledge from Carter that he would speak “with more reticence” in future, opinion polls suggested that the strategy was hitting its target, despite some cost for popular evaluations of the president.⁵⁷ According to polls, by mid-October Carter had won back support among skeptical Democratic and independent voters to achieve parity in the race with Reagan. Not only had his attack impetus fostered concerns about Reagan’s ability to maintain peace, but it was also apparently hindering his effort to reap the electoral advantage of dissatisfaction with the state of the economy.⁵⁸ “The suburban mommies don’t want their little boys to go to war, so they won’t vote

for Reagan,” said one Democrat.⁵⁹ Exemplifying such opinion, a woman in the Detroit suburbs commented: “Reagan might end the recession real fast, but we’d be in World War III quickly.”⁶⁰

Confronting the Reagan campaign, Richard Wirthlin noted, was “the perceptual dilemma that large numbers of voters now wrestle with”: “On the one hand, Reagan would be a strong and decisive leader in foreign affairs (which ‘we’ applaud), but on the other hand, he would be too quick to push the nuclear button (which ‘we’ fear and abhor).” He counseled a stress on peace.⁶¹ As the *New York Times* journalist Hedrick Smith noted, the campaign sought to project Reagan as a pragmatic, “compassionate” Republican, as “strong but not trigger-happy, firm but not belligerent, positive but not divisive, calm but in command.”⁶² In his acceptance speech, Reagan emphasized peace alongside an attack on the administration’s record. “Never before in our history have Americans been called upon to face three grave threats to our very existence, any one of which could destroy us,” he said. “We face a disintegrating economy, a weakened defense and an energy policy based on the sharing of scarcity.” He added: “Today, a great many who trusted Mr. Carter wonder if we can survive the Carter policies of national defense.”⁶³

A series of missteps and gaffes threatened to reinforce Carter’s case that Reagan lacked presidential ability. Notably, before the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in August, he referred to the Vietnam War as a “noble cause.” Hindsight suggests that the phrase astutely connected with a desire to recover pride in the American mission, yet contemporaries usually saw the comment as “an attempt to open up national wounds that had scarcely healed,” as the journalists Jules Witcover and Jack Germond observed.⁶⁴ The impetus of the Carter campaign, as notably exemplified by its commercials, sought to push home the advantages of incumbency and the doubts about Reagan by emphasizing the weighty responsibilities of the White House and the responsibility for nuclear warfare in particular. According to the Reagan aide Lyn Nofziger: “We’re running against Carter on the economy, and we’re trying to make Reagan into a man of peace.”⁶⁵ That strategy achieved perhaps its greatest success during the television debate with Carter. “Reagan mentioned ‘peace’ so often it sounded like he had invented the word,” wrote the journalist Lou Cannon.⁶⁶

After the debate, Reagan’s poll ratings improved, but volatility remained a characteristic of the campaign. This was a campaign in which

many Americans fixed their voting choice at an unusually late point in the campaign; the Gallup postelection poll suggested that as many as 37 percent made their decision during the last week, and for one in ten this was on Election Day itself.⁶⁷ The last days of the campaign were especially volatile when, in the aftermath of the Carter-Reagan debate, there was a potential breakthrough in the quest to secure the release of the hostages. The columnist William Safire, supportive of the Republicans, stingingly wrote that Iran's leader, Ayatollah Khomeini—"the religious fanatic who hates us all"—"has cast his vote for Jimmy Carter, seeking to swing the US election to a man he knows he can continue to control."⁶⁸ Carter believed that this was a crucial moment. "Now my political future might well be determined by irrational people on the other side of the world over whom I had no control," he wrote in his memoirs. "If the hostages were released, I was convinced my reelection would be assured; if the expectations of the American people were dashed again, there was little chance that I could win."⁶⁹ Caddell's polling for Carter supported the view that end-of-campaign events proved crucial in the defeat: "The debate aftermath and the reentrance of the hostages issue focused critical attention on the Carter administration, specifically, for many previous uncertain voters, on economic management."⁷⁰ The effort to escape a referendum on the administration's overall performance through a foreign policy-oriented campaign, especially focusing on Reagan's deficiencies, had failed. In the Reagan camp, Wirthlin agreed that the election represented a referendum on Carter's record, especially with respect to the economy, though he disagreed that the president had a chance to win reelection until the breakthrough in the hostage crisis proved abortive.⁷¹ Reagan aides had nevertheless long feared that an "October Surprise"—resolving the hostage crisis—might ruin their candidate's chances.⁷²

It was not only the fast-moving events of the campaign year that lent volatility to the Carter-Reagan contest. A key reason for this volatility was the failure of both Carter and Reagan to inspire much enthusiasm among many voters. "The 1980 presidential election," noted the political scientist Thomas Cronin, "is being treated as almost as unwelcome an event as the attack on Pearl Harbor."⁷³ Gallup reported that, in October, just 23 percent of poll respondents had a "highly favorable" opinion of Reagan and that Carter's favorability rating was little better, at 30 percent. According to a Roper postelection poll, only 21 percent of Carter voters and 43

percent of Reagan voters reported “a good deal of enthusiasm” for their candidate.⁷⁴

Supporting the views of Caddell and Wirthlin, pollsters for the candidates, most analysis of the 1980 presidential election emphasizes dissatisfaction with the Carter record as the key factor explaining Reagan’s victory. Such analysis, moreover, usually attributes more electoral power to economic factors than to issues of foreign policy. This is not to suggest, however, that ideas about foreign policy did not distinguish Reagan voters from Carter voters. The *New York Times* exit poll found that a majority of respondents favored a tougher line against the Soviet Union, even if increasing the risk of war; of this group, 70 percent voted for Ronald Reagan, while Carter had a 64 percent share of the minority that disagreed.⁷⁵ Moreover, polls suggested that voters perceived greater differences between Carter and Reagan on foreign issues than on domestic issues.⁷⁶ Modeling presidential approval ratings between 1977 and 1987, the political scientists Miroslav Nincic and Barbara Hinckley assert that a 1 percent increase in a president’s overall rating was the product of a 1.5 percent increase in approval on economic policy and of a 3 percent increase in approval on foreign policy. This is a conclusion that acknowledges the greater impact of public opinion on the economy but nevertheless underlines the significance of foreign policy in influencing a president’s popularity. As a result, according to Nincic and Hinckley, most observers “underestimated the impact of foreign policy evaluations, which we now see was sizable.” They furthermore note that the hostage issue was more likely to influence Carter’s approval ratings among Democratic supporters, whereas, for Republican and independent voters, relations with the Soviet Union were more important.⁷⁷ Another study in political science, by John H. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan, and Eugene Borgida, similarly concludes that the existence of large differences on foreign policy between the candidates coincided with a context of high salience for such issues in 1980, overall generating a large effect on the election.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The 1980 election results showed that Carter’s effort to hold together the Democratic coalition had failed, though his success in remaining

competitive through the campaign and sometimes in achieving a lead in the polls was an impressive achievement, given that the context for the incumbent was the least promising since Herbert Hoover sought reelection in 1932.⁷⁹ Perhaps the most notable demographic shift in voting behavior was one for which foreign policy seemed important: the movement of men toward the Republican Party.⁸⁰ The 1980 presidential election marked the emergence of the modern gender gap in American politics, sometimes interpreted then as a transient phenomenon, but soon consolidated as an enduring aspect of electoral behavior; the CBS/*New York Times* exit poll reported that 56 percent of male voters but only 47 percent of female voters supported Reagan.⁸¹ It was a trend that had been noticed during the campaign, inviting strategic responses. Reagan pledged to nominate the first female Supreme Court justice, a pledge designed to tackle the gender disparity in support that opinion polls were revealing.⁸² Carter's pollster Pat Caddell identified "human issues—peace, human rights, women's rights, justice for minorities"—as "'feminine' issues," and he argued that they involved an area of strength for the president; conversely, "*a perceived lack of Presidential decisiveness on masculine issues*" was a weakness.⁸³ Two sets of issues seemed important in explaining Reagan's relative lack of appeal among women; the first involved antifeminism, epitomized by the party's failure to embrace a platform commitment to the Equal Rights Amendment, and the second involved his warmonger image.⁸⁴ Yet analysis of exit polling downplayed the former in favor of the latter, suggesting that issues of war and peace primarily informed the appearance of the gender gap.⁸⁵ Such an insight was in line with earlier manifestations of gender disparities in voting that had involved greater support among women for Republican candidacies, often connected with foreign policy and defense.⁸⁶ This was probably, at least in part, a misperception; aides in the Reagan White House soon concluded that views on the economy and the welfare state as well as on foreign policy informed the gender gap.⁸⁷ In summer 1982, Richard Wirthlin noted that approval ratings for Reagan's foreign policy were at 62 percent among men but just 45 percent among women, but he subsequently discovered both that the gender gap seemed volatile and that the contribution of foreign policy, as distinct from other issues and concerns, was relatively minor.⁸⁸

More broadly, the Reagan years saw the revitalization of the Repub-

lican Party. Even if Reagan did not succeed in mobilizing enduringly an electoral majority in support of his party, Republicans achieved what Wirthlin labeled “parity” status with the Democrats.⁸⁹ Reagan pursued military buildup, increasing spending on defense while making cuts elsewhere, but he also pursued negotiation with the Soviet Union, proving to be more pragmatic than his tough words sometimes suggested. “While the Iran-Contra scandal and several of the Reagan administration’s other adventures in the third world, as well as the massive deficits accrued by the herculean defense buildup, gave liberal critics ample ammunition for battling Reagan’s conservative national security legacy, the American public, by and large, believed in Reagan’s big picture: America was the world’s ‘indispensable’ superpower,” writes David Farber. Moreover, Farber adds: “Reagan’s presidency gave conservatives a national security platform they were thrilled to build on.”⁹⁰ Reagan’s America, furthermore, involved a celebration of patriotism, perhaps especially evident at the Los Angeles Olympics of 1984 and in Reagan’s reelection campaign.⁹¹ Foreign policy contributed to Reagan’s popularity as president.⁹² Yet the rightward trend in public opinion on foreign policy of the late 1970s did not last long. “The *trend* in foreign policy attitudes,” notes William Mayer, “was clearly in a liberal direction through most of the 1980s.” The Reagan years witnessed a decline in the proportion of Americans who saw the Soviet Union as enjoying military superiority, and support for more spending on defense declined. It is a trend that can be interpreted as a signal of public support for the Reagan agenda on the Cold War in tackling the insecurities of the late 1970s.⁹³

The election of 1980, then, was a watershed in American politics, marking the rejection of Jimmy Carter rather than an electoral embrace of Ronald Reagan and the Republican Party. During that election year, foreign policy often dominated the headlines, yet the electoral salience of hard times still eclipsed that of overseas challenges. Even though public opinion on foreign policy was moving rightward, especially under the shock of “America’s first encounter with radical Islam” and an apparent advance by the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the president saw a foreign policy-grounded appeal as offering his best chance of retaining the White House.⁹⁴ Yet Reagan managed to escape the effort to cast him as a dangerously trigger-happy conservative, in the mold of Barry Goldwater, on his road to victory.

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