

# Political Booknotes

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## **Electing Jimmy Carter**

Patrick Anderson  
LSU Press, \$24.95

**By Steven Stark**

A somewhat flawed book can still be valuable; so it goes with Patrick Anderson's *Electing Jimmy Carter*. Anderson was Carter's chief speechwriter during the 1976 campaign and has only now come out with his journal-memoir of that experience. (He says he misplaced the original manuscript for 16 years. Ironically, the delay might actually heighten interest in the book, given Carter's reemergence as a floating international mediator.) As someone who worked for Carter on issues during the 1976 primary campaign and knew Anderson briefly, I think the book does a far better job than anything I've seen of capturing the real day-to-day feel of a unique campaign in American political history.

After all, it's hard to recall another modern president who didn't have some significant exposure to Washington or the media and academic establishments in the years before he took office. (Even Bill Clinton had a Rhodes scholarship, went to Yale Law School, and spent much of the eighties in Pamela Harriman's Georgetown living room.) Yet, only six years before Carter started campaigning for president, he had been nothing more than a state senator from an obscure region of Georgia where he had worked as a peanut farmer and businessman. Never has a modern political figure risen so far and so fast on the national scene. Anderson, a sometime-novelist, faithfully documents the exhilaration and the chaos as everyone who was anyone tried to claim a piece of Jimmy

Carter. As Anderson implies, the only true parallel to the '76 Carter phenomenon may be something like the overnight rise of a rock band like the Beatles. Such a comparison suggests that politics had become an integral branch of popular culture—and thus subject to its many whims—long before Reagan hit Washington.

Though journalists tend to be far too casual about throwing around superlatives, it's safe to say that nothing like the Carter phenomenon will ever happen again. Americans have always yearned for outsiders to run their government, but the trauma of Watergate was so intense it encouraged voters to take a leap of faith with a candidate whose calling card was that he was *completely* untouched by the crises of the last decade—which also meant that he had never done much of anything of national significance. What's more, the Carter campaign took place in a media era that no longer exists—pre-*USA Today*, pre-cable, pre-wall-to-wall coverage. A Jimmy Carter today would quickly get discovered by the media and burn his 15 minutes of fame months before the first primary.

In retrospect, it was his uniquely rapid rise that probably spelled Carter's political doom. As smart and as perceptive as he was, no one could make the jump from a rural Georgia peanut farm to the White House that quickly, particularly in a pre-computer communication era when you couldn't even get a copy of *The New York Times* down South until several days after it had been published. For Carter and his team, the learning curve was just too steep. The irony is that Carter finally had begun to learn what was required to be a good president after several years in office—at

just about the moment the voters decided it was time for someone else.

Anderson captures this unique process quite skillfully. Yet as good a read as this book is and as valuable as it may prove to scholars, it's terribly out of focus. Coming 20 years after the fact, one longs for at least more dispassionate analysis from someone who was there. The flip side of Anderson's verisimilitude is that in the heat of the moment, he understandably manages to lose his perspective from time to time. For example, he describes Carter's post-convention *Playboy* interview in which he confessed to "lust" in his heart—a rather trivial event in retrospect—as the key point at which Carter's persona began to fall apart. And the book is full of anecdotes about fights between campaign aides no one is likely to remember (the fights or the aides).

What's more, the 20-years-after-the-fact quality of the book gives it a certain cruelty. From his lofty position in the campaign, Anderson is forever putting down other Carter advisors, particularly anyone connected with the Kennedys. In a campaign, passions run high and a derisive comment at the time about someone's looks or how the candidate doesn't like an aide is understandable. But these people have families and careers, and words have consequences. There's a story I once heard about Harry Truman that after he left the presidency, he went to speak at a college campus where he got embroiled in a policy argument with a student. That night, after the speech, Truman called the school's dean. His purpose, he explained, was to make sure that nothing happened to the student just for arguing with a former president. In this book, Pat

Anderson is Truman's antithesis.

Anderson also makes the traditional speechwriter's mistake of overrating his own prose. James Reston wrote after the '76 campaign that Carter had not yet delivered a single memorable speech, but Anderson contends that Carter actually gave five such orations that year and includes one of them in the book's appendix. It's true that great words can be forgotten, but invoking the test of time, Reston has won the argument hands down.

In fact, as Anderson correctly points out in the book's astute concluding chapter, it was Carter's failure to appreciate the importance of words and rhetoric that helped cripple his term in office. It says something about the Carter presidency that his most famous oration—"the malaise speech"—is known by a term he never actually used. But it goes beyond that. This was a candidate with almost perfect pitch; his great and unusual political strength was as a listener and an empathizer, which is why he is still so skilled at mediation. In the troubled years of the mid-seventies, empathy gave Carter an unusual ability to read the public mood, but for a time it obscured the fact that presidents are ultimately elected to lead, not to listen, and they lead through words. A writer, it has been said, is someone who has something to say, not someone who has to say something—an aphorism that could apply to leaders as well. Anderson's efforts notwithstanding, decent-to-a-fault Jimmy Carter could never quite figure out what that something to say should be. *Steven Stark, a commentator for National Public Radio and CNN, is writing a book about television.*

**Self-Inflicted Wounds: From LBJ's Guns and Butter to Reagan's Voodoo Economics**

Hobart Rowen

*Times Books/Random House, \$25*

**By Wallace C. Peterson**

On January 1, 1966, Hobart Rowen began his career with *The Washington Post*, where he has worked for 28

years as a reporter, senior economics correspondent, financial editor, and columnist. In 1965, economist Arthur Okun's "Discomfort Index," a measure obtained by adding the unemployment and inflation rates, was 6.1, the lowest level the index reached in the 33 years between 1960 and 1993.

Rowen joined the *Post* at the start of the long, slow economic and political decline of the United States. Today, Rowen says, ". . . America can no longer boast that it is number one. Indeed, we are the world's largest debtor nation, and many critics insist we have become a second-class power unable to lead the world by virtue of either our unmatched economic prowess or our political sagacity."

Though momentarily the nation is modestly recovering from the 1990-91 recession, the economic decline of which Rowen speaks is real. Since the late sixties, the real wage of the American worker has fallen, family income has stagnated, the gap between rich and poor has widened, and productivity growth, the ultimate engine for economic progress, has fallen to less than half its historic average.

The central thesis of Rowen's thoroughly documented book is in the title: Our wounds are largely self-inflicted. Specifically, Rowen says, the immediate fault lies with the last six presidents, each of whom failed at critical times to make the right decisions that would have maintained the nation's economic health.

Rowen is right that the decline began with Johnson, a flawed and tragic figure. Rowen relates in rich detail Johnson's economic duplicity, showing how in 1966 he concealed the exploding costs of the Vietnam War not only from the American public but from his economic advisors, trying desperately to find money for both the war and his Great Society. In 1966, military spending jumped by 21.6 percent over 1965, an \$11 billion increase, which at today's

prices would be nearly \$50 billion. For political reasons, Johnson refused even to consider a tax increase (1966 was an election year), which Keynesian economics dictated and practically every economist in the nation supported.

With unemployment below four percent in 1966, the large increase in military spending without an offsetting tax increase was a sure-fire formula for inflation. The consumer price index jumped from a modest 1.6 percent rise in 1965 to a 5.5 percent increase by 1969.

Enter Richard Nixon, a more evil than tragic figure, as *The Haldeman Diaries* make clear. Besides his failure to end the Vietnam War before thousands more Americans died unnecessarily, he confronted three major economic problems. The first was the inflation inherited from the Johnson administration; the second was the crisis in the postwar Bretton Woods international monetary system; and the third was the arrival of OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) on the world economic stage.

As analyzed by Rowen, Nixon's record in each of these cases was not wholly black or white, but dark gray, tending more toward failure than success. Nixon's "game plan" to bring inflation down involved "gradualism," using tight control of money and expenditures to slow the economy down without causing too much unemployment. Gradualism didn't work. The economy slid into a recession in 1970, costing the Republicans dearly in the year's congressional elections.

The failure of gradualism led to Nixon's August 15, 1971 bombshell—his "New Economic Policy" that suspended the gold convertibility of the dollar (for foreign official holders of dollars), devalued the dollar, and, more importantly, ended fixed exchange rates, a key feature of the postwar international monetary system established at the Bretton Woods,