2

DETTENTE AND ITS DISCONTENTS

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ealing with the aftermath of Nixon's presidency required coming to terms with the Vietnam War as well as with Watergate. So long as America had been heavily involved in the war, public debate took the form of searing arguments about the legitimacy of American military involvement overseas. In the calmer political climate after 1974, debate shifted to questions about how the country's failures in Vietnam had altered its military and political position, and whether the United States should temper its cold war military commitments—or expand them. The arguments focused in particular on the policies of détente designed by Nixon's all-powerful voice on foreign affairs, Henry A. Kissinger, whom Ford retained as both secretary of state and national security adviser.

To liberal and left-wing Democrats, the war had been a moral and political catastrophe, an utter disgrace that had been brought about by what they considered a corrupting anticommunist truculence common among traditional cold war Democrats and conservative Republicans alike. Two disastrous presidents, one from each political party, had, they believed, escalated and then prolonged a cruel and unwinnable conflict by severely stretching their constitutional mandates. Accordingly, even before Nixon's resignation, Democrats on Capitol Hill began trying to curb the executive's power to wage war independent of Congress. In November 1973, after eight previous failures, the House and Senate finally overrode Nixon's veto of what had become known as the War Powers Resolution.

Henceforth, presidents would have to consult with Congress before commencing any hostilities abroad, and continue such consultation regularly until hostilities ceased. If Congress did not formally declare war or enact "a specific authorization for such use of United States Armed Forces," within sixty days, the president would have to end military engagement. Supporters of the resolution claimed that it did no more than restore to Congress, in part, the sole authority to declare war, as explicitly stipulated in the Constitution. Critics, however, called the resolution an unconstitutional infringement on the president's explicitly delegated powers as commander in chief. In his veto message, Nixon denounced what he called Congress's "clearly unconstitutional" effort "to take away, by a mere legislative act, authorities which the President has properly exercised under the Constitution for almost 200 years." But Nixon was now in serious political trouble—widely distrusted for his intense secrecy in conducting foreign affairs, as in much else—and Congress was ready, willing, and able to assert itself.

After the elections of 1974, the resurgent Democrats turned to exposing the dirty secrets of recent American foreign policy. The covert activity of the CIA became their primary target. Late in 1974, the investigative reporter Seymour Hersh of the New York Times revealed some of the details (the "family jewels") about numerous unsavory and sometimes flatly illegal secret CIA operations, ranging from clandestine actions leading up to the coup in Chile in 1973 to the surreptitious surveillance of domestic antiwar protests and protesters. Caught off guard, President Ford, early in 1975, had the director of the CIA, William Colby (whom Nixon had appointed in 1973), quickly provide a report on the allegations, and then appointed a commission headed by Vice President Rockefeller to investigate the CIA. Although established to get at the truth, the Rockefeller Commission was also designed to limit investigation to the specific abuses Colby detailed, thereby allowing the White House to get out in front of Congress on the issue, and forestalling what Deputy Staff Coordinator Richard B. Cheney called "a serious legislative encroachment on executive power."

The commission's report, released six months later, chronicled various sordid ventures, including a large domestic surveillance project called Operation CHAOS, and concluded that "the CIA has engaged in some
activities that should be criticized and not permitted to happen again." But the commission also sidestepped (some observers said whitewashed) several disturbing allegations about plans by the CIA, dating back to the Eisenhower administration, to assassinate foreign leaders, including Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Fidel Castro of Cuba. By failing to exonerate the CIA, the report alienated the agency's conservative supporters; but by failing to criticize the CIA more harshly, the report angered many members of Congress.

Dissatisfied Democrats, led by Senator Frank Church of Idaho, picked up where the Rockefeller Commission left off. With the active cooperation of the CIA's director, Colby, Church's special select committee on intelligence activities assembled information on matters previously slighted, including the assassination plots. In December 1975, the committee released a detailed six-volume report, which called the CIA a "rogue elephant" and recommended far more intense congressional oversight of it. Soon, both houses of Congress established permanent intelligence committees to do just that. Pressure on both the CIA and the White House grew when Senator Dick Clark of Iowa guided through Congress legislation that shut down a shadowy CIA project, approved by the Ford administration, to fight forces in Angola that had been backed by the Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, in the White House, it was decided that the disloyal Colby, a holdover from the Nixon administration, had to be removed. In July, after consulting various top White House officials, Staff Coordinator Donald Rumsfeld sent Ford a list of possible replacements headed, somewhat oddly, by the name of U.S. Solicitor General Robert Bork. (Although Bork lacked even the slightest experience in intelligence work, he was considered, according to the capsule description that accompanied Rumsfeld's memo, a "strong team player"—reflecting his controversial actions on Nixon's behalf as a participant in the so-called Saturday-night massacre, which had removed Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox at the height of the Watergate scandal late in 1973.)

Finally, Ford himself undertook a major reform of intelligence gathering, including the establishment of a three-member Intelligence Oversight Board of private citizens to whom all federal intelligence entities were required to report regularly. But Ford's actions came too late to let him grab the mantle of reform away from Congress, or prevent the further shift to Capitol Hill of powers formerly exercised exclusively by the White House. In due course, the CIA would find itself accountable to nine different congressional bodies.*

A larger struggle loomed over the entire direction of American foreign affairs, as shaped by the policy of détente with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, fashioned by Henry Kissinger. Kissinger, a former professor at Harvard, had established himself as the indispensable man of American foreign policy—a tough-minded, supremely well-connected intellectual and bureaucratic infighter who, thanks to an admiring press and his reputation as a ladies' man, had also become a celebrity. But Kissinger faced growing criticism from across party lines. Leftists and liberal Democrats held him equally responsible with Nixon for secretly widening the conflict in Southeast Asia and for an assortment of smaller but equally nefarious covert actions, above all the coup in Chile. Kissinger, the former academic, for his part thought the liberals were his most formidable political foes; indeed, his policy of détente can be interpreted, at one level, as an effort to delegitimize the left by reducing cold war tensions. In a costly miscalculation, he and Ford paid far less heed to traditional cold war Democrats and conservative Republicans who charged that Kissinger's realist philosophy debased American power, prestige, and principles by placing stability above other considerations. With its Metternich-like obsession about the global balance of power, and its post-Vietnam pessimism about America's military standing, Kissingerian realism, these critics claimed, actually encouraged aggression by the Soviet Union and China.

The leading Democratic hawk, Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson of Washington, had strongly supported Johnson's and Nixon's policies regarding Vietnam, and was appalled by the antiwar ascendancy within his own party. Long a critic of arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union—in 1963, he had opposed President Kennedy's Test Ban Treaty, holding out for tougher inspection requirements—Jackson attracted other alienated, hardline cold war Democrats. Their ranks included leaders of organized labor who were staunchly anticommunist and now sharply opposed Nixon's and Kissinger's proposals for free trade with the Soviet Union. They also in-

*The congressional efforts to rein in the CIA accompanied other legislation designed to make government and political operations more transparent. The Privacy Act, passed in 1974, enlarged the scope of the Freedom of Information Act of 1966 by granting individual citizens access to files about them compiled by the federal government. A year later, Congress created the Federal Election Commission to disclose information about campaign finances and oversee the public funding of presidential elections.
cluded the coterie of intellectuals and policy specialists who were becoming known as neoconservatives. (Among the latter, on Jackson's own staff, was a tough young arms control expert, Richard Perle, whom liberal opponents on Capitol Hill quickly nicknamed the "Prince of Darkness.")

With an eye on a presidential run in 1976, Jackson seized on the plight of observant Jews in the Soviet Union who were being persecuted and prevented from emigrating to Israel. In order to prod the Russians, Jackson added provisions to impending trade bills that would require the Kremlin to loosen its emigration quotas for Jewish citizens. Late in 1974, the Soviet Union quietly agreed to step up its issuing of exit visas, in accord with Jackson's stipulations—but Jackson quickly turned around and helped win unanimous approval in the House of legislation that demanded even larger concessions on Jewish emigration. The Soviets, who had already protested to Kissinger that Jackson's activities were meddlesome, felt manipulated and betrayed. Ford, infuriated, blamed Jackson's double cross on his president's ambitions. But Jackson's goals were principled as well as political, and his main target was Henry Kissinger.

Other antirealists came chiefly, although not exclusively, from the Republican right. The aggressively anticommunist Goldwater-Reagan wing of the party had always regarded Nixon's and Kissinger's realpolitik as a craven sellout, in a direct line with what they believed had been Franklin D. Roosevelt's capitulation to Stalin at the Yalta Conference in 1945. (That Kissinger had risen to power largely thanks to his friend and patron Nelson Rockefeller redoubled the Republican right's contempt.) Yet even more moderate Republicans, including a close friend of Ford's, the former secretary of defense Melvin Laird, complained that détente had created the illusion that the Russians had abandoned their quest for global domination. And at the center of power, Ford's own secretary of defense, James Schlesinger—who had served as the director of the CIA before Nixon added him to the cabinet in 1973—clashed repeatedly with Kissinger. The disputes stemmed in part from Schlesinger's and Kissinger's conflicting, outsized egos. But Schlesinger had long opposed any expansion of détente with the Soviets, and with a domineering manner all his own, he voiced that opposition inside Ford's cabinet.

Ford had to walk a delicate line among the contending forces. Late in 1974, he held a summit meeting with the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in the Siberian port of Vladivostok, chiefly to renegotiate Kissinger's Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT). The agreement had been approved in 1972 and was due to expire in two years. Ford quickly had to decide whether to sustain the realist spirit of the original treaty, which permitted the Soviet Union to have superiority in land-based missiles and the United States to have superiority in multiple-warhead missiles, or to heed calls from Schlesinger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to press for strict equality in all areas. (Kissinger, who thought multiple warheads of superior strategic importance, feared that the Pentagon's hard line on Soviet land-based missiles could destroy any hopes of renewed arms limitation—but he had learned in advance from Brezhnev that the Soviet Union was prepared to negotiate on the basis of equality, if the Americans so desired.)

Despite Kissinger's commanding presence in Vladivostok, the president sided with the antirealists—and, exceeding Schlesinger's best hopes, Ford stuck to his guns. A SALT II agreement would place equal ceilings on both countries regarding their numbers of intercontinental ballistic missiles, in which the Soviet's arsenal outstripped the Americans—the antirealists' main area of concern. But even that victory was insufficient for Senator Jackson, who charged that the bargain granted the Soviet Union too much in the way of airpower and required the Americans to scuttle an important weapon, the Tomahawk cruise missile. (Ford was persuaded that both the medium-range bombers permitted to the Russians and the American Tomahawks were obsolete and of no importance except as bargaining chips.) With quiet assistance from Schlesinger, Jackson blocked any vote in the Senate on SALT II. Ford, looking to his own reelection campaign, dropped the issue, and the treaty was effectively put aside. Round one had gone to Kissinger's adversaries.

Kissinger's efforts on other diplomatic fronts were equally fruitless, and this outcome further emboldened his critics. In the Middle East, Kissinger continued the "shuttle diplomacy" that he had undertaken after the Yom Kippur War in 1973, trying to arrange separate agreements between Israel and each of its Arab neighbors, and pave the way for a general peace in the region. A particularly promising series of negotiations between Israel and Jordan advanced through the summer of 1974. But the bargaining broke down in October, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel dragged his feet, and Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization, supported by the other major Arab nations, forced King Hussein of Jordan to abandon the effort. A possible Egyptian-Israeli accord also collapsed, chiefly, Kissinger concluded, because of political pettiness and disarray within Rabin's government.

Dramatic events in Southeast Asia further damaged the realist camp. The Treaty of Paris that ended America's active military involvement in
Vietnam in 1973 had earned Kissinger the Nobel Peace Prize. (His North Vietnamese counterpart in the negotiations, Le Duc Tho, declined the honor.) But by the middle of 1974, it was perfectly clear that the flimsy South Vietnamese government, for which nearly 60,000 Americans had lost their lives, was doomed. Virtually every policy maker had foreseen as much even before the ink had dried on the Treaty of Paris—except, perhaps, Kissinger, who would claim he thought the long war had worn out the North Vietnamese. Adequate American financial aid could, he contended, prevent a communist victory, although, he admitted, it could take two or three years before the South Vietnamese “will be able to handle themselves adequately.” The Ford White House, under pressure from the State Department, duly reassured the South Vietnamese that help was on the way. Congress, though, was thoroughly sick of the war and rejected any proposed expenditures that might prolong the United States’ involvement. In any event, the peace treaty that Kissinger himself had negotiated, in recognizing the proclamation of Vietnam’s sovereignty by the Geneva Convention of 1954, removed the original cornerstone of American involvement—the idea that North Vietnam had invaded Vietnam South. The treaty looked more like a sop to American pride than a serious recommitment to the region.

The situation in Cambodia, the region’s other war-torn country, was even grimmer than in Vietnam. Although Kissinger and Ford felt a persisting commitment to the South Vietnamese, they had more or less given up on the Cambodians, whom Kissinger had always regarded as useful but minor allies in the struggle in Vietnam. Congress, for antiwar reasons, also abandoned Cambodia to its fate. Even minimal requests from the administration for Cambodian aid were dead on arrival on Capitol Hill.

On April 17, 1975, Khmer Rouge troops marched into Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh, force-marched its population of 3 million into the countryside, and renamed the country Democratic Kampuchea. A four-year reign of murder and terror began under the dictator Pol Pot, which would result in the deaths of approximately 2 million Cambodians—between one-quarter and one-third of the nation’s entire population. On April 21, South Vietnam’s president, Nguyen Van Thieu, his army in retreat and facing certain defeat by a massive North Vietnamese military offensive, resigned. Two days later, President Ford, in a speech at Tulane University not vetted by Kissinger, announced that, “as far as America is concerned,” the war in Vietnam was finished.

The North Vietnamese and the Vietcong—encouraged, Kissinger sus-pected, by Ford’s words—pushed into Saigon more quickly than expected, necessitating a sudden evacuation of 1,400 Americans and 5,600 of their Vietnamese allies. The next day, April 30, South Vietnam formally surrendered. The chaotic departure scenes, especially the last American helicopter lifting off the roof of the embassy in Saigon, were disturbing as well as embarrassing, and would be seared into the memory of a generation. But Americans in and outside the administration were also palpably relieved that a national nightmare far longer than Watergate had ended at last. Any criticism directed at Ford, his political backers thought, could be deflected toward the recalcitrant antiwar Democratic Congress. In any event, leading Republicans as well as Democrats made it clear to the administration that, across party lines, as the House minority whip Representative Bob Michel of Illinois put it, “the sentiment in Congress is no military aid.” Conservatives had expressed a vestigial desire to back a last-ditch effort but were doubtful that the South Vietnamese could regroup and mount a credible offensive. Antiwar liberals simply took heart at the war’s conclusion. Among the war’s chief architects, only Kissinger, who had begun coming to terms with its certain outcome in the days and weeks before the surrender of Saigon, expressed open anguish and bitterness at the final defeat.

Less than a month after Phnom Penh fell, the new Cambodian regime gave the administration an opportunity to flex America’s muscle—and to ease, at least temporarily, the tensions between the realists and their adversar-ies. Just after five o’clock in the morning on May 12, the Pentagon received an alert that the Khmer Rouge had fired on, boarded, and seized the crew of the American merchant vessel Mayaguez, which had been sailing in the Gulf of Siam. The Kampucheans charged that the ship had strayed into their own waters, a highly disputable claim. Determined to prevent any display of American weakness so soon after Cambodia’s and South Vietnam’s surrender, the White House quickly devised and put into motion plans to rescue the captives and punish the Khmer Rouge. Amid the emergency, differences inside the White House over détente disappeared.

After a tense day of military maneuvering, the White House confirmed that the Kampucheans had taken the Mayaguez and its crew to the island of Koh Tang, just off the Cambodian mainland. The next evening, about 100 U.S. Marines invaded Koh Tang, and two hours later American air strikes hit entrenched Kampucheans positions on both the island and the
mainland. The early fighting was costly to the Americans, leaving eight helicopters destroyed; eighteen U.S. servicemen, including fourteen Marines, killed; and forty-one more servicemen, including thirty-five Marines, wounded. (Total casualties in operations connected with the affair would come to eighty-two, of whom half were killed and half were wounded—more than twice the number of captive crew members.) But less than two hours after the bombing began, a Navy reconnaissance pilot spotted the released crew of the Mayaguez in a small fishing vessel, waving white flags. Minutes later, the men boarded an American destroyer that had been sent to the scene. The incident was over—although on Ford’s orders, American planes briefly continued to bomb the Cambodian mainland, in what some commentators later contended was purely an act of reprisal.

For the moment, Ford’s decisiveness under fire appeared to have recouped his presidency. The cover of Time magazine featured a no-nonsense portrait of the president, glaring, tight-lipped, beside a triumphant declaration: FORD DRAWS THE LINE. Ford’s languishing public approval ratings instantly rose by eleven points. By refusing to consult with congressional leaders before making his decisions, the president had pushed back hard against the War Powers Act. Above all, after years of drifting and despair, there was some bracing news. Ford later recalled the remark of a freshman House Democrat from Kentucky: “It’s good to win one for a change.”

There was less to this triumph, though, than initially met the public eye. Ford himself was upset by the inordinately high number of American casualties. A report released soon after the crisis by the General Accounting Office (GAO) concluded that pressure on the Khmer Rouge government from the People’s Republic of China had played a major role in obtaining freedom for the crew of the Mayaguez. Subsequently declassified documents reveal that Ford approved bombing missions that, for all he knew at the time, might easily have killed the men he was trying to rescue. That Ford was able to look like a composed, tough president without also losing the Mayaguez crew—the best possible outcome, from the White House’s perspective—was as much a matter of good luck as military prowess.

In any event, the artificial solidarity in Washington over foreign policy did not last long. Kissinger finally secured an Egyptian-Israeli accord in early September 1975, but only after Ford’s coolness to Israel following the earlier failure provoked a fierce counterreaction from American pro-Israel groups (led by the American Israeli Political Action Committee, AIPAC)—and only after Ford and Kissinger agreed to provide Israel with direct military aid above and beyond a previously promised arms shipment worth $1.5 billion. While he fended off foul personal attacks from AIPAC and conservative Israelis, Kissinger helped to contain what became known as the Solzhenitsyn affair—an episode that left behind abiding anger among both right-wing anticommunists and neoconservatives. In the late spring, the AFL-CIO labor federation arranged for a banquet to be held in Washington at the end of June to honor the Soviet novelist, Nobel laureate, and recently exiled dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Conservative Republicans including Senators Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond, asked the president to make the time to meet with Solzhenitsyn on the day of the banquet, and perhaps even attend the festivities. Helms and Thurmond—neither of whom was friendly to organized labor or famous for his literary interests—knew that such a powerful symbolic act would sour relations between the United States and the Soviet Union at a delicate moment.

Some White House staffers, including Staff Coordinator Rumsfeld’s normally circumspect, conservative young deputy, Dick Cheney, strongly urged the president to go ahead. Refusing to do so, Cheney argued in a memo to Rumsfeld, was based on “a misreading of detente” as a policy which declared that “all of a sudden our relationship with the Soviets is all sweetness and light.” An emblematic gesture, Cheney reasoned, would augment “the President’s capability to deal with the right wing in America,” and thereby improve the chances of ratifying a SALT II pact. In any event, Cheney charged that the Soviets “have been perfectly free to criticize us for our actions and policies in Southeast Asia over the years, to call us impolitic, war-mongers, and various and sundry other endearing terms, and I can’t believe they don’t understand why the President might want to see Solzhenitsyn.”

Kissinger, sorely provoked, intervened and suggested a brief private meeting with Solzhenitsyn at the White House. Ford, fed up, and deep in preparations for an impending second summit with Brezhnev, spurned both arrangements. (Although he privately called the sometimes imperious and prickly Solzhenitsyn “a goddamned horse’s ass,” the president did offer the writer an open invitation to visit the White House after the meetings with Brezhnev concluded.) Robbed of their chance to obstruct détente on the eve of the summit, Helms, Thurmond, and the others said nothing more; and Solzhenitsyn never took up Ford’s invitation to the White House. But Ronald Reagan harped on the incident, blasting what he called Ford’s snub of the courageous Russian. The political damage to
In 1976, the dissident Soviet physicist Yuri Orlov and ten associates formed the Public Group. The human rights provisions contributed to the rise of dissident movements inside the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Kissinger, known as an amoral, pessimistic realist, grasped the agreement's pervasive anticommunist philosophy, and its political importance, better than his more stridently anticommunist critics did. “All the new things in the document are in our favor—peaceful change, human contacts, maneuver notification,” he told the cabinet shortly after he and Ford returned to Washington. “It was the President who dominated the Conference and it was the West which was on the offensive. ... Anyone observing from another planet would not have thought Communism was the wave of the future.” But in the White House, concern grew that Kissinger’s latest exploit had handed the Republican right a new and powerful political weapon. And this fear was no longer hypothetical. On July 15, less than two weeks before Ford departed for Europe, the conservative senator Paul Laxalt of Nevada announced the formation of a Citizens for Reagan committee that would explore the option of battling the president for the Republican nomination.

Ford to Kissinger was done, and the affair would rankle for many years to come.

The second summit, held in Helsinki in late July, caused Ford even greater political headaches. His private meetings with Brezhnev were contentious, and made no progress toward achieving a revised SALT II pact. More portentously, the Helsinki meetings were held in conjunction with a climactic series of meetings of a multinational group founded in 1973, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which had drafted a wide-ranging agreement on economic and scientific cooperation, freer movement of peoples, and the settling of disputes between East and West. Kissinger, who saw the accords as nonbinding but a positive step toward relieving cold war tensions, insisted that Ford attend the meetings and place his personal stamp of approval on the accords.

Along with its provisions renouncing the use of force and advocating human rights, the agreement included a passage that recognized the borders of communist-controlled Central and Eastern Europe as permanent, although they could be altered by peaceful negotiations. To Kissinger, the language amounted to little more than a recognition of existing realities that were not likely to change anytime soon, and in any event had no deleterious effect on American power. Compared with what the Russians had hoped to gain from the accords—and compared with the far more aggressive line about the Soviet Union’s control of Central and Eastern Europe contained in the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine—the Helsinki document actually represented a step backward for Soviet hard-liners. Above all, Kissinger told Ford in an emphatic briefing paper, “[T]he philosophy which permeates most of the CSCE’s declarations is that of the West’s open societies.” Ford agreed, and delivered a speech that, while praising efforts to resolve world tensions, insisted on the primacy of Americans’ devotion “to human rights and fundamental freedoms and thus to the pledges that this conference has made.”

Among the American foes of détente, “Helsinki” immediately became a byword for “sellout.” Even before Ford left the United States, Scoop Jackson denounced the accords as a formal capitulation to Soviet tyranny, and told the president not to go. The entire anti-détente coalition, from Eastern European immigrant and ethnic organizations upholding the rights of “captive nations” to the editors of the Wall Street Journal, ripped into Ford and Kissinger for ratifying the “new Yalta.” “I am against it,” Ronald Reagan announced, “and I think all Americans should be against it.” Three decades later, the attacks look ridiculous, even hysterical, in light of how the accords’ human rights provisions contributed to the rise of dissident movements inside the Soviet Union and its satellite states.

* In 1976, the dissident Soviet physicist Yuri Orlov and ten associates formed the Public Group to Promote Fulfillment of the Helsinki Accords, which later was linked with the American-initiated private group Helsinki Watch; thereafter, similar groups arose around the Soviet bloc and fostered the internal resistance to Soviet domination that would culminate in the revolutions of 1989–1991. Norman Podhoretz, who as editor of the neconservative Commentary indignantly criticized the accords, has since acknowledged that the agreement “put a very powerful weapon in the hands of disidents ... in their struggle against the Communist regime. Ultimately, Helsinki, instead of ensuring the permanence of the Soviet empire, contributed to its eventual demise.” Podhoretz, “Bush, Sharon, My Daughter, and Me,” Commentary, April 2005, p. 38.
Two other men were also at the center of action in the White House that autumn: Staff Coordinator Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy and longtime protégé, Dick Cheney. Outwardly, they were an unlikely pair. Rumsfeld—voluble, brash, openly ambitious—had attended Princeton (where he was a varsity wrestler), flown as a naval aviator, and worked two years in Chicago as an investment broker at the venerable firm of A. G. Becker before he entered public service in 1962, winning the first of four elections to Congress from a district in suburban Chicago. In the House, Rumsfeld befriended Gerald Ford, whom he helped elevate to minority leader in 1965. Considered a moderate, dovish on Vietnam, Rumsfeld went on to make his mark as Nixon's director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). One of Lyndon Johnson's antipoverty initiatives in his Great Society program, OEO was a bureaucratic cog slated for oblivion, but Rumsfeld improved its management and effectiveness.

It was while he was at OEO that Rumsfeld hired as his personal assistant Cheney, a taciturn man who was raised in Wyoming, had dropped out of Yale, and had been a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin. Cheney flunked a job interview with Rumsfeld in 1968 but was more impressive a year later, and he thrived as the details man for a mentor who was better at issuing edicts than actually seeing them through. The laconic westerner's political views were, at least initially, markedly more conservative than those of his boss. (Robert Hartmann, who disliked both Rumsfeld and Cheney, said of the latter that, during the Ford years, “whenever his private ideology was exposed, he appeared somewhat to the right of Ford, Rumsfeld, or, for that matter, Genghis Khan.”) But amid the Watergate affair, as congressional liberals attacked executive authority, Rumsfeld began moving to the right, notably on arms control and other issues related to détente, as well on resisting Congress; and he and Cheney became an almost inseparable team within the White House bureaucracy. Cheney did stay in Washington, solidifying his finances as vice president of an investment consulting firm there, while Rumsfeld was in Brussels serving as the U.S. envoy to NATO in 1973 and 1974. But as soon as Ford tapped Rumsfeld to become his staff coordinator, Rumsfeld brought Cheney along as his assistant.

Between the summer of 1974 and the summer of 1975, Rumsfeld and Cheney took charge of White House operations and tried their best to shape domestic and, in time, foreign policy. Although their politics had closer affinities in many ways to the Republican right than to the moderates in the administration, they resisted the temptation represented by Reagan and saw in Ford a surer instrument for their own designs—provided that the liberal Republicans and moderates were cast aside. Ford's old friend Hartmann found himself turfed out of his office (and deprived of his easy access to the president) after Rumsfeld helped arrange to have the room turned into a private presidential study. Rockefeller, to whom Ford had promised broad powers over domestic policy making, complained bitterly about Rumsfeld's repeated efforts to undermine him. (These included helping to force the vice president, in Rockefeller's own words, to "relinquish my responsibilities for overseeing the work of the Domestic Council," the major in-house body advising the president on domestic affairs.) Kissinger saw in Rumsfeld a formidable, sharp-elbowed political infighter opposed to détente who, he wrote years later, "understood far better than I did that Watergate and Vietnam were likely to evoke a conservative backlash, and that what looked like a liberal tide after the election of the McGovernite Congress [in 1974] in fact marked the radical apogee."

Cheney, quieter but ideologically edgier than Rumsfeld, expanded his purview beyond gofer duties such as inspecting the White House bathrooms and ordering new salt shakers for the private residence in the East Wing. He had never had any truck with Nixon's accusers in the Watergate scandal, which he regarded, according to one of his close business associates at the time, as "just a political ploy by the president's enemies." The only unconstitutional aspects of the affair, Cheney thought, involved Congress's unflagging efforts to establish its supremacy over the executive, as foreshadowed by measures such as the original War Powers Resolution in 1973. Cheney carried that Nixonian spirit with him into his new job, urging in his draft memo on the CIA that the administration try to head off any congressional investigation lest it cause "a serious legislative encroachment on executive power." In a top-level meeting in May 1975, he considered as one option investigating the reporter Seymour Hersh of the New York Times, and the Times itself, when the newspaper published a story of Hersh's about a secret submarine reconnaissance mission inside Soviet waters. (The participants at the meeting also weighed the possibility, according to Cheney's notes, of obtaining a search warrant "to go after Hersh papers in his apt [that is, his apartment]." The White House ultimately did nothing.) Cheney later admitted helping Rumsfeld's efforts to undermine Rockefeller by putting "sand in the gears" to kill the vice president's projects.

Cheney combined his preference for a strong executive with his con-
has been a Navy flier; now Rumsfeld would have as much formal power (and access to his old friend President Ford) as Henry Kissinger. The new White House chief of staff (with the former sonorous title now restored) would be Dick Cheney.

And that was not all. The very next day, Vice President Rockefeller, acting at Ford's request (or so Rockefeller stated much later), announced publicly he had withdrawn his name from consideration for the Republican ticket.

So many conflicts, personal and political, got settled in the shuffle, with so many winners and losers from different sides of the policy wars, that it was difficult to interpret what had happened. Ford himself insisted simply, to his staff as well as to the press, that the time had come for him to name his "own team" in foreign policy, consisting of "the very best men with whom he can work comfortably." But many political pundits initially thought that Kissinger had pulled off a coup by toppling his adversary Scowcroft while bringing his friend Scowcroft into the White House. Conservative Republicans, furious at the firing of Scowcroft, certainly thought that Kissinger was the man pulling the strings. But that is not at all how Kissinger understood the changes: for several nights running, he consulted with friends about whether he should resign completely, and nearly did so. Scowcroft, with his insolent treatment of the president, had been a marked man for some time; Ford later confirmed that, except for his concern about stability and continuity after Nixon's resignation, he would have fired Scowcroft right away. But, to repeat, conservative Republicans were livid at Scowcroft's dismissal, and Ford's hopes that reducing Kissinger's duties would mollify the right wing proved illusory.

The biggest losers in the shuffle, in fact, were Kissinger (now demoted from his office inside the White House) and his old benefactor, Rockefeller (now a lame duck). Bush's sudden ascendance at CIA has since been widely interpreted as a move to make Bush unavailable as a vice presidential candidate in 1976 (such a candidacy, after Bush's near miss in 1974, was a real possibility). The biggest winners were Rumsfeld and Cheney, who would have been a Navy flier; now Rumsfeld would have as much formal power (and access to his old friend President Ford) as Henry Kissinger. The new White House chief of staff (with the former sonorous title now restored) would be Dick Cheney.

* Ford had originally hoped to announce Rockefeller's withdrawal first, thereby leading off with news that would please the Republican right. But when *Newsweek* magazine received leaked information that Schlesinger would be fired, the president hastily rearranged his plans. As a consequence, the right absorbed the first heavy blow, and the disorderliness conveyed an impression that Ford, who had hoped to appear forceful, was actually losing control of his own administration.
have more power than ever to set the administration’s course. (One of the shrewdest and best-informed reporters in Washington, Lou Cannon of the Washington Post, claimed immediately that Rumsfeld was in fact, as the Post’s headline put it, the “silent architect” of the shake-up.) Despite Schlesinger’s departure, the Ford administration took a large step to the right, especially in the conduct of foreign policy.

During the year to come, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld buried Henry Kissinger with regard to a variety of issues large and small, including the revival of the SALT II talks. Simultaneously, Chief of Staff Cheney, whom Washington reporters nicknamed “the Grand Teuton,” imposed a more efficient, centralized, secretive regime in the White House, and also took charge of the president’s election campaign as the White House liaison to the Ford for President committee. By March 1976, Ford would tell a campaign audience in Peoria, Illinois, “We are going to forget the use of the word détente”—a shift Rumsfeld and Cheney had been working toward for several months.

None of this, though, soothed hard-line conservative Republicans. “I am not appeased,” Ronald Reagan said, when asked about the demotion of Henry Kissinger. Less than three weeks later, Reagan telephoned the White House and got right to the point. “I am going to make an announcement,” he told Ford, “and I want to tell you about it ahead of time. I am going to run for President.”

As 1976 began, Gerald Ford could not be blamed if he wished he’d never left Congress. The previous September, amid the continuing controversy over Helsinki and with the cabinet shake-up impending, two women, on separate occasions within three weeks of each other, tried to shoot him while he was on political trips in California. (The first of the two, Lynette “Squeaky” Fromme, had been a member of the notorious Charles Manson murder gang that, gruesomely, marked the descent into criminal insanity of one current in the 1960s counterculture.) Ford’s vivacious and candid wife, Betty, once a modern dancer with the Martha Graham troupe, had won enormous public respect and affection by forthrightly facing and recovering from breast cancer surgery in 1974. A year later, though, in a widely watched television interview, she matter-of-factly condoned abortion, extramarital sex, and smoking marijuana. It was a refreshingly honest and unscripted performance for a first lady; but her husband, who adored her, had to worry about the political repercussions among right-wing moralists—and he had to hear his wife mocked in those quarters as an unladylike loudmouth and worse. (Ford needn’t have worried: his wife’s public approval ratings were already higher than his, and they would improve over the coming months. Her comments, although offensive to religious conservatives, probably did the Ford campaign more good than harm overall.)

The turbulence subsided a bit in December when Ford held a successful summit with Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist leadership in Beijing, and elicited, for once, only muffled growls on the right. At home, the economic news had been gradually brightening for several months. Still, in the first week of January Ford’s public approval rating stood at a dismal 39 percent, and his disapproval rating was 46 percent. No modern president with such poor polling numbers in January had ever gone on to win in November.

There was never a doubt, though, that Ford would run, and his gradual awakening to the genuine threat posed by Ronald Reagan reinforced his determination to do so. By March, the Ford campaign had become tight-knit and disciplined, headed by Cheney, the political consultant (and former adviser to Reagan) Stuart Spencer, and the pollster Robert Teeter. Knowing that Reagan would present himself as an outsider and as a conservative, Ford’s men decided to eschew presenting their candidate as “nice guy Jerry,” and to stress his seriousness and solid presidential mien—the President Ford who had persevered in the Mayaguez crisis without losing his cool. And Reagan, who led Ford decisively in the early polling, had already handed the Ford campaign a political gift that kept on giving. Back in September, in a speech to the Executive Club of Chicago, Reagan proposed to cut federal spending by $90 billion, balance the budget, and cut personal income taxes to an average of 23 percent—all by transferring authority from the federal government to the states. It was a wild idea that, if ever put into effect, would cause massive unemployment for public workers and force states to raise their taxes, including income taxes. The Ford campaign fully exploited the speech as evidence that Reagan was a pie-eyed extremist who literally didn’t know what he was talking about. All the better for the Ford campaign, the first Republican presidential primary would be in New Hampshire, where there was no state income or sales tax at all.

Reagan should have won New Hampshire. It was the most conservative of the New England states, and its elections often turned on intensely personal, small-town campaigning; the charismatic Reagan, although known mainly as a master of television, was also an excellent stump speaker. But the continuing reverberations from his “$90 billion” speech did him in,
along with a higher than expected voter turnout (which normally favors incumbents) and his handlers’ poor tactical decision to have him campaign elsewhere for two days before the vote. Although Ford barely prevailed, with 51 percent of the total, his victory had the feel of a tremendous upset.

Ford’s campaign picked up steam and Reagan’s now seemed plagued by slipups. Florida, the site of the next major primary, had large numbers of elderly voters and Hispanics (including many Cubans), two groups normally stirred by attacks on the Washington establishment and Kissinger’s détente policies. But Reagan decided to throw into the mix an old idea of Goldwater’s about investing Social Security funds in the stock market. The idea was anathema to retired senior citizens who relied on their monthly checks, and who could recall conservatives’ hostility to Social Security dating back to inception of the program during the New Deal. Ford condemned Reagan’s plan as foolish and risky—and wound up with 53 percent of the vote in the Florida primary.

The Reagan forces, badly in need of a victory, regrouped in North Carolina, where Senator Jesse Helms placed all his political resources at Reagan’s disposal. These resources included Helms’s own campaign genius, an ultraconservative lawyer from Raleigh, Thomas Ellis. A veteran of southern-style hardball politics, Ellis was well schooled in stimulating the political id of the state’s white voters. (At the time, although it received little publicity, he was also a director of the Pioneer Fund, a eugenicist group that funded efforts to prove the genetic superiority of whites over blacks.) Ellis failed to bring all his campaign tricks into play. (Early on, he tried to publicize a local newspaper’s speculation that Ford would pick Senator Edward Brooke, a moderate black from Massachusetts, as his running mate, but Reagan nixed the plan.) Yet Ellis demanded and received complete control of the statewide Reagan organization. And presumably he could see how, in North Carolina, special dividends would accrue from focusing fire on Kissinger—the secretive Svengali who had supposedly destroyed U.S. military superiority and who just happened to be (it went without saying) a foreign-born Jew from Harvard who spoke with a funny accent.

Ellis and Helms also selected the ideal foreign policy issue for the Reagan camp to use against Kissinger and the administration, an issue that Reagan had already begun raising in Florida: the United States’ rights to the Panama Canal. Since the late 1960s, the United States had sought unsuccessfully to renegotiate the terms of the original canal treaty, signed in 1903. Kissinger, fearing that Panama could become another Vietnam, reopened negotiations in 1974. Immediately hard-line conservatives in the Senate turned the halting of any new treaty into a hot-button cause, made hotter because Panama’s strongman ruler, General Omar Torrijos, had been linked to Fidel Castro. Ford was seeking a compromise that would permit a continued limited American presence in the Canal Zone. Reagan seized on the issue, declaring in one stump speech after another: “[W]e built it, we paid for it, it’s ours and . . . we are going to keep it.” Some Republicans of differing persuasions criticized the hard-liners in Washington as well as Reagan for their inflammatory and divisive rhetoric on Panama: Vice President Rockefeller accused Reagan of being “totally deceptive” and “telling the American people things that are not true,” and Senator Barry Goldwater firmly supported Ford with regard to the canal and said he thought Reagan might, too, “if he knew more about it.” Not only did Reagan’s public statements contain “gross factual errors,” Goldwater charged; they reflected either “a lack of understanding of the facts” or “a surprisingly dangerous state of mind which is that he will not seek alternatives to a military solution when dealing with complex foreign policy issues.” But even Goldwater, the pro-military conservative hard-liner, could not persuade everyone; indeed, some voters in the primaries thought the narrow militarism Goldwater criticized in Reagan was exactly what the country needed. Thanks to his friends in North Carolina and the imbroglio over the canal, Reagan wound up winning 52 percent of the vote—the first time a competitor had ever defeated a sitting president in a Republican primary.

The result in North Carolina shifted the momentum in favor of the challenger. Reagan hit his stride, taking to national television and repeating his litany of the administration’s sellouts to the Russian communist slave masters. His rhetoric was a throwback to the early 1950s, when Republicans attacked the Truman administration by caricaturing its “striped pants” diplomats as effete, un-American, and soft on communism, and accusing these diplomats of having stabbed the country in the back. Now, however, a right-wing Republican was turning the tables on a Republican administration. Stunned, Ford replied feebly that Reagan’s attacks were “irresponsible.” (Kissinger wanted Ford to counterattack fiercely, by saying that Reagan’s rhetoric was endangering America’s international standing; but the president heeded Cheney’s advice to tread softly lest he permanently antagonize Reagan’s supporters.) An attempt by the Ford camp to lighten things up by allowing the president’s press secretary, Ron Nessen, to appear on an acidly satirical network television show, *Saturday Night Live*, long one of the president’s main tormentors, fell flat. In May, Reagan scored impressive victories in Texas, Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, and Nebraska, followed, in June, by
another win in California—his home state, to be sure, but also a huge trove of delegates.

With many moderate Republicans saying that they would refuse to support Reagan if he won the nomination, and many pro-Reagan conservatives saying they would bolt the party if he did not win it, some insiders feared that the party was on the verge of collapse. “There’s just no comparison with 1964,” one veteran Republican in California fretted, alluding to Goldwater’s debacle in the election of that year. “Our party was viable then. The devastation in 1976 is likely to be far deeper than just a party losing in a Presidential campaign.” Yet Ford found his second wind, and held the support of just enough influential conservatives (including Goldwater) to create a semblance of party unity. Long political friendships helped him gather support from so-called superdelegates, party insiders named as delegates above and beyond those selected in the primaries. The president campaigned hard across the country, fully exercising his powers of patronage. Ford generally ran better in the northern and border states than in the South, winning primaries in Michigan, Maryland, West Virginia, Ohio, and New Jersey.

On the eve of the Republicans’ national convention in Kansas City in August, the president held only a narrow lead in delegates but had come within a whisker of winning the nomination. Reagan, at the last minute, called a Hail Mary play and named a moderate Republican, Senator Richard Schweiker of Pennsylvania, as his prospective running mate. The maneuver mainly earned derision as a stunt. Ford finally prevailed, on the first roll call of the delegates, but with a margin of only 117 votes out of a total of 2,257 cast—an embarrassing result for a sitting president. Although the center held for Ford, the outcome also indicated how close the Republican right had come since 1964 to recapturing the party.

Other developments at the convention humiliated the president. In the platform committee, the Reagan forces advanced a plank called “Moral-ity in Foreign Policy” that summarized their candidate’s talking points on foreign policy and defense from the primary campaign. Kissinger (once again) and Rockefeller objected furiously, but Cheney and other campaign insiders countered (once again) that the right had to be placated and that, in any case, a platform was not a binding statement. Ford reluctantly allowed the plank into the platform, along with another calling for a constitutional amendment to prohibit abortion. On the choice of his running mate, Ford was leaning strongly toward naming a moderate, until Reagan’s southern delegates informed Ford’s camp that they would place Reagan’s name in nomination unless his preferred candidate—the blunt conservative senator Robert J. Dole of Kansas—got the nod. Ford crumpled.

Having staved off one “outsider” candidate, Ford now prepared to face another, very different, outsider: the Democratic nominee, Governor Jimmy Carter of Georgia. Unlike Reagan, Carter seemed to have come out of nowhere in 1976. Nearly a dozen other Democrats contested him during the primaries, a measure of how highly the party thought of its chances in the aftermath of Watergate and Ford’s pardoning of Nixon. The candidates included Scoop Jackson, a diminished but determined George C. Wallace (who had survived an assassination attempt in 1972), and Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana (backed strongly by organized labor), as well as liberals such as Congressman Morris “Mo” Udall of Arizona and the former senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma. Carter had three enormous advantages over the others: he was identified with neither the new liberal faction nor the traditionalists in the party; as a governor, he could run untainted by any association with the Washington establishment; and, perhaps most important, as a southerner, he would attract states that had fallen into Republican hands since 1960. He quickly gained another unanticipated plus by capturing the imagination of influential sectors of the national press, including the New York Times, whose friendly coverage helped catapult him out of obscurity.

After winning the precinct caucuses in Iowa and the first primary in New Hampshire, Carter turned aside Wallace’s heavily favored forces in the South, narrowly beat Udall in several races, then staved off a late challenge from the young liberal governor of California, Reagan’s antithetical successor, Edmund “Jerry” Brown. At the nominating convention—which the Democrats held, pointedly, in New York City—Carter came across as a moderately liberal Democrat. In his acceptance speech he lauded his party’s “progressive” heritage of reform, called for a national health care program, and even quoted one of Bob Dylan’s lyrics from the 1960s. Carter chose as his running mate Walter Mondale of Minnesota, a figure congenial to party traditionalists and liberals alike. On certain issues, though, in both the primaries and the general election, Carter positioned himself close to Scoop Jackson (and to the right of the administration), criticizing the Helsinki accords as an authorization of “the Russian takeover of Eastern Europe,” and blasting Ford over the Solzhenitsyn affair. It was as if he was trying to reweave the different strands of Democratic thinking that had unraveled during the convulsion over Vietnam.

Yet Carter’s main appeal was less political or ideological than personal
and moral. A proud, upright Southern Baptist and Annapolis-trained Navy engineer who still ran his family’s peanut farm in a small town in Georgia, he presented himself to the voters as a God-fearing, hardworking meritocrat, ready to sweep away the corrupt barons of Nixonian Washington (who, by dint of Nixon’s pardon, included by implication Gerald Ford). Carter pledged never to lie to the voters and claimed that, by reflecting “the high moral character of the American people,” he would lead the nation out of the morass of Vietnam and Watergate to higher ground. His campaign slogan—“Why not the best?”—promised an alternative to the insiders’ mediocrity. The public responded favorably: in mid-August, as Ford limped to victory at the convention in Kansas City, Carter led by a wide margin in the opinion surveys, as high as 29 percentage points in the Harris Poll.

The Ford campaign devised a multitrack response to Carter’s high-minded appeal. In order to project gravitas, the president himself would adopt the familiar “Rose Garden strategy,” sticking close to the White House and receiving free publicity from television and the newspapers simply by doing his job. Bob Dole, like Spiro Agnew before him, would be the campaign’s attack dog, ridiculing Carter as a slick neophyte who should not be trusted with the presidency. The campaign’s paid televised advertising would amplify Ford’s down-to-earth, regular-guy persona, making special mention of his popular wife and personable family. Finally, beleaguered by the dismal polls, the Ford camp challenged Carter to a series of televised debates. Carter, who still needed to connect with a public that hardly knew him, accepted, and three appearances were scheduled. No presidential candidates had debated each other since the famous contests between Kennedy and Nixon in 1960.* Carter and Ford’s debates have not left the same historical mark, but they proved crucial to the campaign.

The first debate, in late September, gave Ford an enormous lift. Like an overprepared student in an oral examination, Carter looked stiff and sounded tentative. (He would later say he was overawed by the occasion.) Ford, who had worked hard on his delivery in a mock television studio, appeared, by contrast, calm, authoritative, and even expansive. As previously agreed to by the candidates, the questioning focused on domestic affairs and the economy, and Ford reeled off impressive figures about rebounding growth and receding inflation. Carter, however, was forced to explain himself over proposals he had made or appeared to have made about raising taxes and generating a huge federal surplus. In a clever maneuver, Ford also attacked the Democratic Congress as the real source of the current mess in Washington. The charge was unjust, especially given Congress’s contribution to the economic recovery for which Ford now took credit. But Ford’s attack was effective in offsetting Carter’s image as an outsider and in deflecting memories of Watergate and the pardoning of Richard Nixon. Instantly, Carter’s once forbidding lead in the polls dropped to eight percentage points.

In the second debate, held ten days later, the specter of Helsinki reversed the campaign’s momentum. The general topic was foreign affairs, and Ford was asked a predictable question about the Helsinki agreements and the Soviet Union’s control of Eastern Europe. The president had a reasonable answer already prepared, to the effect that the American government’s official policy was to recognize the sovereignty and independence of each of the Eastern European countries. But Ford botched his lines, declaring, “There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford administration.” What was supposed to be a careful distinction between the accords and the actual governing principles of American diplomacy turned into a bizarre statement that sounded as if Ford had lost touch with reality. Worse, when pressed, Ford repeated the mangled line, then failed to clarify it for several days, stalling his campaign and reviving all the old questions about his basic competence. Carter, handed an unexpected favor, made the most of it, both during the debate and after: “And I would like to see Mr. Ford convince the Polish-Americans and the Czech-Americans and the Hungarian-Americans in this country that those countries don’t live under the domination and supervision of the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain,” he declared, minutes after Ford’s gaffe.

Ford never fully recovered, although he came close. In the last days of the campaign, he cut loose from the White House, barnstormed the country around the clock, and changed the subject to the economy, which continued to show signs of improvement. The third debate, on general subjects and with an awkward format, did not make much of an impact. On Election Day, a large number of eligible voters took a pass on both candidates,

* In August 1964, the Senate, with the acquiescence of President Lyndon Johnson, killed a bill that would have suspended the equal-time provisions then governing broadcast media, thereby ending any possibility that Johnson would debate Barry Goldwater. In 1968, Hubert Humphrey challenged Richard Nixon to one-on-one debates, but Nixon refused, on the grounds that it would be unfair to exclude the third-party American Independent candidate, George Wallace. In 1972, Nixon saw no reason even to consider debating George McGovern.
so that the turnout was the lowest since 1948, a mere 54 percent—normally a boost for the challenger. Carter made his most impressive showings in the South: he broke the hammerlock of the Republicans' southern strategy and even managed to carry Mississippi, which had not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1956. But nationwide, Carter, who had once looked invincible, won only 50.8 percent of the popular vote, to Ford's 48.2 percent. Carter's margin in the electoral college was the slimmest since Woodrow Wilson's in 1916. The Democrats did hold on to their commanding congressional majorities, but picked up only one seat each in the Senate and the House.

The morning after Election Day brought the victors more a sense of relief than elation. With virtually nothing to claim in the way of a mandate, Jimmy Carter would still have to prove he was the leader the country was looking for after the shocks of the early 1970s. If he failed, there were many others who would be ready to lead very differently—including the man who had only barely lost to Gerald Ford.

JIMMY CARTER AND THE AGONIES OF ANTI-POLITICS

JIMMY CARTER had reason to be pleased when he gave an extended interview to Playboy magazine during a break in his campaign in the summer of 1976. Many American voters still did not recognize his name, and Playboy reached more than 5 million readers every month. Its previous interviewees included the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., William F. Buckley Jr., Jawaharlal Nehru, and Dr. Albert Schweitzer. The interviewer, Robert Scheer, formerly of the left-wing magazine Ramparts, had difficulty understanding Carter's religious views, which some people suspected were prudish and holier-than-thou. But Carter did his best, explaining himself patiently while trying to sound like an up-to-date regular guy. "Christ set some almost impossible standards for us," he said at the conclusion of the interview. Quoting from the Book of Matthew, he admitted that like any other human he had sinned and "committed adultery in my heart many times," but that his redeemer forgave him. In any event, he would not judge another man lest he commit the sin of pride: "Christ says don't consider yourself better than someone else because one guy screws a whole bunch of women while the other guy is loyal to his wife."

Carter's remarks were wholly in line with his Baptist faith. Yet they were also open to malicious interpretation—and as soon as the interview appeared in late September, doubts arose about his political acumen. Political professionals and press commentators thought he had erred badly by