

"Half-Past Carter"

The Carter Report Card

by Charles R. Foster and Anne L. Vorce

Even though the Carter Administration has passed its mid-term point, its foreign policy remains elusive to observers at home and abroad. Despite a number of major well-publicized foreign policy initiatives, the Carter stance on foreign policy is seen as fuzzy and erratic by friend and foe alike. Doubt and uncertainty about the Administration's leadership in foreign affairs are reflected domestically in its low ratings in public opinion polls. Confused by its lack of clear direction in international matters, allies question the reliability of its commitments to security, to human rights and to the management of the dollar in terms of the world economy. The Carter foreign policy is viewed as a series of disjointed improvisations in response to immediate domestic or international pressures.

The substance of the Carter foreign policy, however, is more impressive than its general image suggests. The above description of the Carter Administration is not unique. It is similar to Zbigniew Brzezinski's assessment of the Nixon foreign policy after its mid-term point. At that time Mr. Brzezinski prepared a report card to rate the Nixon performance; it seems appropriate now to use Mr. Brzezinski's method to evaluate this administration's foreign policy.

For a serious assessment of the Carter Administration's foreign policy, its substance must be separated from its style, although they are interrelated. The popular view is that the Administration has conducted its foreign policy in an amateurish and *ad hoc* manner, but actually the over-all approach has been a mixture of rather sophisticated global activism and naive messianic zeal. The theoretical underpinnings are based on earlier Brzezinski writings and speeches. Acting within Brzezinski's "architectural" structure, which is built upon the theory of bilateralism, the Carter Administration has attempted to localize conflicts through multilateral negotiations in a number of areas to prevent military conflict. The Carter Administration has attempted to regain for the U.S. its role of world leader in both a moral and a power sense.

In the early days of the Carter Administration, the rhetoric flowed freely as the Administration at-

tempted to present its overly ambitious plans for reshaping the world order. When this agenda did not correspond exactly — or even roughly — to certain developments, the Carter Administration was unable to explain the compromises it had to make in its programs as essential for the protection of U.S. vital interests. In many cases, the Administration's rhetoric was contrary to what was obviously taking place. Its media style raised false expectations. Coming to power on a platform of morality, Carter rose largely on the basis of his messianic rhetoric in the grand tradition of American liberal diplomacy. As a result, Carter's actions have generally been described in light of his moral stance. This is especially true of his position on human rights, which was based on standards, largely for domestic political reasons, that could never be realistically applied. Although his human rights stand proved effective in certain cases, it also alienated some allies. In dealing with certain countries he was forced to compromise on the issue to protect other, more vital, U.S. interests. His failure to apply such standards in Iran, Korea, Nicaragua and China — at least publicly — made his high-sounding rhetoric seem suspicious. He has never properly explained the complex nature of negotiations involving American interests. By defending authoritarian regimes, he has diminished the positive impact of his rhetoric.

Another problem of the Carter Administration is the division within the Administration itself. The most publicized differences have been those between Vance and Brzezinski, who have often given speeches expressing opposing views on the same topic on the same day. Also, debates within the NSC, particularly over linkage, have resulted in the departure of several key members, including Samuel Huntington.

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