

The Original Washington Outsider

By Kahlil G. Chism



Weighing Peanuts, November, 1965

“This year may be the first year in our history when it is better to run for president as a peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia, than as a United States senator [sic] from Washington, DC.”

- Jimmy Carter, Speech to the AFL-CIO, Akron, OH, 05/28/1976

When the photograph accompanying this article was taken, Jimmy Carter was serving the last year of his second term as a Georgia State Senator. At that time he and his wife, Rosalynn, were owners and operators of the Carter Warehouse, a general-purpose seed and farm supply company located in their home town of Plains, Georgia. Jimmy inherited the Carter Warehouse upon the death of his father, Earl Carter, Sr., in 1953. But even in 1965, this self-described Georgia peanut farmer had not yet considered running for president.

Upon completing two terms as a state senator, Carter lost his first gubernatorial campaign in 1966 but won the next election. He became Georgia's 76th governor on January 12, 1971. Carter was a one-term governor, which was all that the state of Georgia allowed, so when he announced his candidacy for president, in December 1974, his political experience totaled eight years. He had the briefest political record of any presidential candidate since Woodrow Wilson. Many factors would conspire over the next couple of years to allow Carter to say with confidence in a 1976 speech to the AFL-CIO, that “This year may be the first year in our history when it is better to run for president as a peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia, than as a United States senator [sic] from Washington, DC.”¹

Of the thirty-seven U. S. presidents who preceded Carter, more than half had been lawyers. Of the five who could claim “farmer” as a profession—Washington, Jefferson, Polk, Roosevelt, and Truman—only the last two were farmers in the modern sense rather than plantation owners. Therefore, Carter was a Washington outsider by occupation as well as by limited beltway experience. Carter was a Washington outsider even by

geography: “I live in the Deep South,” he once noted, “and no Southerner has been elected President in more than a hundred years.”² Nevertheless, he realized the political climate was ripe for change, and knew he had more to offer as a candidate for president than just his experience as a Georgia peanut farmer. He reminded audiences during his campaign that he could “claim with credentials to be an engineer, a planner, a nuclear physicist, a businessman, and a professional naval officer.”³

Public dissatisfaction with Washington, DC, helped pave the way for an outsider from the Deep South to take the White House. “Four or five of the major opinion pollsters worked closely with me,” Carter acknowledged, “and helped to delineate the most important issues among the American electorate as the elections approached.”⁴ The country was still feeling the effects of an unpopular war in Vietnam; the shame of the Watergate scandal lingered; many disagreed with President Ford’s pardoning of Nixon; the Church Committee⁵ hearings of 1975-6 revealed privacy abuses by U. S. intelligence agencies; and the economy was sluggish. “We’ve had economic problems before, we’ve had poor leadership before,” said Carter on his campaign trail, “but we’ve never had such widespread lack of trust among the American people in their own government.”⁶ He believed that the country was ready for a different type of leader.

The image created for Carter during his presidential run helped to emphasize his Washington outsider status. One example of how his team propagated that image among voters was by producing “*Jimmy Who?*,” a fifteen-minute political biography used as a campaign advertisement. Less public relations gimmick than exaggeration of his common-man-from-Plains status, the video showed Carter campaigning in small towns throughout America. It also showed his volunteer cadre, the Peanut Brigade, on the campaign trail. Particularly compelling were the images of Jimmy working in the Carter Warehouse and walking the fields of his farm—inspecting stalks of corn—in blue jeans and work boots. As one citizen interviewed in the video said, “I picture him like one of us; one of the working people, the common people.”⁷

Carter continued to emphasize his commoner appeal even after he won the presidency. That emphasis began with his now famous 1.2-mile walk from the U. S. Capitol to the White House, on Inauguration Day. President Carter surprised the country by carrying his own bags, reducing the size of the White House limousine fleet, and selling the presidential yacht. He also wore cardigan sweaters during his televised fireside chats, enrolled his daughter Amy in a local public school, and temporarily dispensed with the playing of “Hail to the Chief” at public appearances. As Carter wrote in his presidential memoirs, *Keeping Faith*, “I tried in many other ways to convince the people that barriers between them and top officials in Washington were being broken down.”⁸

Although some may have understood and appreciated the symbolism of Carter’s attempts, his common man image was not without its drawbacks. “We began to receive many complaints that I had gone too far in cutting back the pomp and circumstance,” he wrote in understated fashion, “so after a few months I authorized the band to play ‘Hail to the Chief’ on special occasions.”⁹ But the same imagery that helped Carter win the White House also served as basis for ridicule of the First Family. “The local cartoonists had a field day characterizing us as barefoot country hicks with straw sticking out of our ears, clad in overalls, and unfamiliar with the proper use of indoor plumbing.”¹⁰

Once Carter was in the White House, it quickly became apparent to him that there was even a downside to being a genuine Washington outsider: a president needs the

cooperation of Congress to govern effectively. “I knew the Georgia House and Senate delegation in Washington, but only a few other representatives and senators,” he wrote, “and the Democratic political campaigns of the last decade had engendered splits in our party between the liberals and conservatives that would prove impossible to heal. Neither group was confident I was a member of its faction.”¹¹ Being a Washington outsider helped President Carter get to the White House but it might also have hindered his efforts to become a successful political coalition builder.

¹ Carter, Jimmy. “The Prospect of Being President,” speech to the AFL-CIO, Akron, OH, May 28, 1976, in *A Government As Good As Its People*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996.

² Carter, Jimmy. *Why Not the Best?* Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1975.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Note: The Church Committee is the common term referring to the United States Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, a U.S. Senate committee chaired by Senator Frank Church (D-ID) in 1975. A precursor to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, the committee investigated intelligence gathering for illegality by the CIA and FBI after certain activities had been revealed by the Watergate affair. (Source: Wikipedia)

⁶ Carter, Jimmy, “Once the People Rule Again,” speech to the AFL-CIO Convention, Dearborn, MI, September 15, 1976, in *A Government As Good As Its People*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996.

⁷ Goodwin, Rod, Ed Keen. *Jimmy Who?*, VHS, Courtesy Magnus Corporation. Executive producer Gerry Rafshoon. Note: This program was produced during the 1976 campaign for the Democratic Presidential Campaign Committee, and is currently on display in the Campaign Room section of the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, Atlanta, Georgia.

⁸ Carter, Jimmy. *Keeping Faith*. Bantam Books, 1982.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.