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## The "Malaise" Speech: When Jimmy Carter Humbly Told the Truth to Americans

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*Employees at a gas station in Los Angeles watch President Jimmy Carter giving his energy speech over national television on July 15, 1979 (AP file photo)*

Nearly 40 years ago, on July 15, 1979, President [Jimmy Carter](https://www.who2.com/bio/jimmy-carter/) (<https://www.who2.com/bio/jimmy-carter/>) went on national television (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7ysc1P1sH4>) to share with millions of Americans his diagnosis of a nation in crisis. "All the legislation in the world," he proclaimed, "can't fix what's wrong with America." He went on to call upon American citizens to reflect on the meaning and purpose of their lives together.

Carter made several specific policy prescriptions. But in a presidency animated by spirituality perhaps more than any other in American history, this speech called more generally for national self-sacrifice and humility.

At a time when [political strongmen](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/world/middleeast/trump-sisi-egypt-strongmen.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/world/middleeast/trump-sisi-egypt-strongmen.html>), [hypernationalism](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/26/trump-lauds-great-anger-after-some-booed-dallas-cowboys-for-taking-a-knee/) (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/26/trump-lauds-great-anger-after-some-booed-dallas-cowboys-for-taking-a-knee/>), and [xenophobia](https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2017/10/02/the-dangerous-path-trump-xenophobia/Dqc3cxdGm7rsElqJaFRf8M/story.html) (<https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2017/10/02/the-dangerous-path-trump-xenophobia/Dqc3cxdGm7rsElqJaFRf8M/story.html>), have risen in the U.S. and the world, Carter's speech offers a powerful counterexample to these trends.

### A nation in 'very serious trouble'

In 1979, Jimmy Carter was three years into his presidency. The burdens were many. Leading a divided Democratic Party, he faced a staunch and growing Republican opposition. The nation suffered from [stagflation](https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/glossary/stagflation/) (<https://www.economicshelp.org/blog/glossary/stagflation/>), a combination of economic stagnation and 12 percent inflation.

In 1973 the OPEC cartel, comprised mostly of Middle Eastern countries, had cut oil production and [imposed an embargo](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/oil-embargo) (<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/oil-embargo>) against nations that supported Israel. In the late 1970s production declined again. Coupled with high global demand, this generated [an energy crisis](https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/oil_shock_of_1978_79) ([https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/oil\\_shock\\_of\\_1978\\_79](https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/oil_shock_of_1978_79)) that increased gasoline prices by 55 percent in the first half of 1979.

In protest, truckers [set bonfires](https://www.nytimes.com/1979/06/26/archives/rioting-follows-protests-by-truckers-in-levittown-pa-34-communities.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/06/26/archives/rioting-follows-protests-by-truckers-in-levittown-pa-34-communities.html>) in Pennsylvania, and Carter's [approval rating sank](https://books.google.com/kh/books?id=vFXHb58t340C&pg=PA551&pg=PA551&dq=carter+popularity+1979&source=bl&ots=JJjZCjtE-B&sig=G7uRTRE4anki_FwMy-9P9Tzon18&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiE5Lefr5jcAhWafysKHbmQCvcQ6AEikQEwDw#v=onepage&q=carter%20popularity%201979&f=false) ([https://books.google.com/kh/books?id=vFXHb58t340C&pg=PA551&pg=PA551&dq=carter+popularity+1979&source=bl&ots=JJjZCjtE-B&sig=G7uRTRE4anki\\_FwMy-9P9Tzon18&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiE5Lefr5jcAhWafysKHbmQCvcQ6AEikQEwDw#v=onepage&q=carter%20popularity%201979&f=false](https://books.google.com/kh/books?id=vFXHb58t340C&pg=PA551&pg=PA551&dq=carter+popularity+1979&source=bl&ots=JJjZCjtE-B&sig=G7uRTRE4anki_FwMy-9P9Tzon18&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiE5Lefr5jcAhWafysKHbmQCvcQ6AEikQEwDw#v=onepage&q=carter%20popularity%201979&f=false)) to 30 percent.

An anxious Carter cut short his overseas trip to Vienna where he was holding [nuclear-arms talks](#)

(<https://www.nytimes.com/1979/06/16/archives/brezhnev-arrives-in-vienna-and-sees-carter-for-1st-time-they-attend.html>), with the Soviet Union's Leonid Brezhnev.

After a brief stop in Washington, the President retreated to Camp David for ten days. As he considered the severe and interlocking problems facing his administration, Carter read (<http://www.umass.edu/umpress/title/anxieties-affluence>) the Bible, historian **Christopher Lasch's** (<http://www.law.du.edu/faculty-staff/christopher-lasch>) *The Culture of Narcissism* (<http://books.wwnorton.com/books/The-Culture-of-Narcissism/>), and economist **E.F. Schumacher's** (<https://www.economist.com/news/2009/03/26/e.f.-schumacher>) *Small Is Beautiful* (<https://www.harpercollins.com/9780061997761/small-is-beautiful/>), a meditation on the value of local community and the problems of excessive consumption.

He also invited representatives from many sectors of American life – business and labor leaders, teachers and preachers, and politicians and intellectuals – to [consult with him](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-70545-3_8) ([https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-70545-3\\_8](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-3-319-70545-3_8)). By the end of his retreat, Carter had concluded that the country faced more than a series of isolated problems. Collectively they comprised a fundamental cultural crisis.

## The malaise speech

Jimmy Carter Crisis of Confidence speech 1 of 4 July 15, 1979 aka Mal...



Having cloistered himself for an unprecedented length of time, the President emerged from Camp David with great drama on July 15, 1979. In a nationally televised speech that was watched by 65 million Americans, Carter intoned an evangelical-sounding lament about “a crisis of the American spirit.”

He said,

“In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities and our faith in God, too many of us now worship self-indulgence and consumption.”

Indeed, the President’s sermon expounded at length about excess. “Human identity is no longer defined by what one does but by what one owns,” he preached. But “owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning.”

It was a penetrating cultural critique that reflected Carter’s spiritual values. Like the writers of the New Testament, he called out sin. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, he confessed to personal and national pride.

In the mode of theologian **Reinhold Niebuhr** (<https://www.who2.com/bio/reinhold-niebuhr/>), he noted the limits of human power and righteousness. In this moment of national chastening, he committed himself and the nation to rebirth and renewal.

As a scholar (<https://davidswartz.com/>) of American religious history, this so-called “malaise speech” (though Carter never actually used the word “malaise”) was, in my opinion, the most theologically profound speech by an American president since **Abraham Lincoln's** <https://www.who2.com/bio/abraham-lincoln/> *Second Inaugural Address* (<https://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>).

## A squandered opportunity

This articulation of economic and political humility sounded the perfect pitch for a nation whose confidence in civil institutions had been shaken. The [Watergate scandal](https://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/23/us/watergate-fast-facts/index.html) (<https://edition.cnn.com/2014/01/23/us/watergate-fast-facts/index.html>) had revealed corruption in the nation’s highest political offices. The Vietnam War had ended with a [Communist victory](https://www.thoughtco.com/vietnam-war-end-of-the-conflict-2361333) (<https://www.thoughtco.com/vietnam-war-end-of-the-conflict-2361333>).

The “malaise speech” was a continuation of a long-running theme for Carter. In his 1977 [inaugural address](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/carter.asp) ([http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/carter.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/carter.asp)), he intoned, “We have learned that ‘more’ is not necessarily ‘better,’ that even our great nation has its recognized limits, and that we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems ... we must simply do our best.”

Popular memory suggests that the nation reacted negatively to his speech. In [The Age of Reagan](https://www.harpercollins.com/9780060744816/the-age-of-reagan/) (<https://www.harpercollins.com/9780060744816/the-age-of-reagan/>), historian **Sean Wilentz** (<https://history.princeton.edu/people/robert-sean-wilentz>) writes that Carter appeared to be blaming the American citizens for their problems. Others panned Carter’s idealistic approach to the energy crisis as naïve.