

HOMO IMPOLITICUS (Originally published March 1978)

The continuing comedy of American politics is nowhere more evident than in the confused public and media reactions to President Carter and his new administration. Carter's problems mount week by week—foreign relation boo-boos, protesting farmers, striking miners, unhappy Israelis, disappointed blacks, frustrated liberals, anxious conservatives, growling taxpayers, failed energy programs, bankrupt cities, nervous businessmen, social blunders in Washington and a panicky Wall Street. His hyperactive Secretary of HEW makes new enemies for him daily. His own performances as a public speaker inspire no one. Editorial cartoonists have a field day portraying the pious, toothy Plains native as a bumbling hayseed. And yet he continues to enjoy a moderately "favorable press," and no one knows quite what to make of him.

An 80-year-old Mt. Holyoke alumna from New England writes to the school quarterly: "We puzzle and pray over Jimmy C., noting hopefully that one commentator likens him to a typical, moralistic Yankee." An editorialist observes: "After a year of incomparable absurdity, the commentators stand with hats over their hearts, ignore every Carter botch, and extol him for his remarkable capacities as a political campaigner, via his amazing aptitude for dissimulation, exaggeration, and bogus passion."

By now most of the pundits have turned in their evaluations of President Carter's first year in office. The consensus, if there is one at all, is one of uncertainty as to his effectiveness as a leader. In the manner of Carter himself, no one wants to come out and say he is doing a lousy job, and no one wants to say he is doing a good one. Fence straddling is the order of the day; doubts persist.

The general public, trying to make sense out of tax reforms that raise taxes, budget cuts that increase budgets, and bureau reorganizations that create more bureaus, is as confused as the pundits. Our past experience here in Georgia with a Carter administration would suggest that by the end of another three years, we will still be just as confused. As was evident locally and again nationally, Jimmy Carter is more effective as a campaigner for office than as an administrator once in office. By the end of his term, his supporters will claim that his critics have not appreciated all that he accomplished; his critics will point to dozens of promises unkept and programs unrealized and wonder what that was to appreciate.

The late T. H. White in his *Book of Merlyn* published last year as a conclusion to his *Once and Future King*, puts these words on politics and the human race into the old Wizard's mouth: "We find that at the present the human race is divided politically into

one wise man, nine knaves and ninety fools out of every hundred. . . . The nine knaves assemble themselves under the banner of the most knavish among them and become 'politicians': The wise man stands out because he knows himself to be hopelessly outnumbered, and devotes himself to poetry, mathematics or philosophy; while the ninety fools plod off behind the banners of the nine villains, according to fancy, into the labyrinths of chicanery, malice and warfare. It is pleasant to have command, observes Sancho Panza, even over a flock of sheep, and that is why politicians raise their banners. It is, moreover, the same thing for the sheep whatever the banner. If it is a democracy, then the nine knaves will become members of parliament (Congress); if fascism, they will become party leaders; if communism, commissars. Nothing will be different, except the name. The fools will still be fools, the knaves still the leaders, the results still exploitation. This is an optimistic but on the whole a scientific statement of the habits of Homo Impoliticus.

The old Wizard also observed that the poor wise man's fate is always the same in democracy, starving in a garret under fascism, in a concentration camp under communism, liquidation.

Most of us, even as fools, had no trouble classifying Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon as knaves. The problem today, even after long exposure to Jimmy Carter—who, by definition, must be a politician—is that we find it difficult to label him a villain. Maybe that's why we remain fools.

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