

Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and the Twilight of American Liberalism

By the mid-1970s the liberal consensus in American politics was fraying badly. Jimmy Carter had the bad luck of rising to prominence at a time when most Americans were becoming deeply cynical about our government. The Vietnam catastrophe, followed quickly by the Watergate scandal, made it unlikely that any president of either party was going to be well-received in 1976. Carter paid the price for that erosion in confidence. Ronald Reagan offered a new beginning to American voters. The resultant victory by the California Republican ushered in a sea change in our politics which continues to reverberate today. In this course we will examine how such a dramatic shift in our thinking came to pass.

Week One: The Emergence of Jimmy Carter

In this talk we will see how a relatively unknown outsider from Georgia positioned himself to win the 1976 Democratic Party nomination for the presidency. We will examine his upbringing in rural Georgia, his education, naval career, and rise to prominence in Georgia politics.

Week Two: Carter in the White House: The Good Times

Jimmy Carter was quite well received by the public during his first year or eighteen months in office. His approval ratings were quite high, and voters approved of his simplistic, down-home manner. But it was clear from the start that Carter never intended to “play ball” with the Washington establishment, or even his own party leaders in Congress. The seeds of his future destruction were being planted when he locked horns with Ted Kennedy, Tip O’Neill, and other key power brokers. We will analyze Carter’s key failings as a practical politician.

Week Three: The Decline & Fall of the Carter Presidency

Carter's final two years in power was marked by misfortune and blunders. Most of his time was spent wrestling with seemingly intractable problems abroad. This week we will discuss his responses to the Iranian Hostage Crisis and the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan. Additionally, Carter was forced to confront the second Arab Oil Embargo of the decade. These multiple crises probably would have doomed any administration, but it must be said that Carter’s missteps contributed to the meltdown.

Week Four: Ronald Reagan and the Triumph of the American Conservative Movement

In this talk we will drill down into the emergence of the Far Right in American politics from Barry Goldwater to "the Reagan Revolution." We will attempt to identify the reasons for Americans' disenchantment with liberal politics during the Sixties and Seventies.

Week Five: The 1980 Presidential Election

This election was arguably one of the most significant in American history. Reagan pledged to roll back many of the main provisions of FDR's New Deal, and "get the federal government off the backs of ordinary Americans." Carter flailed rather lamely to defend his rather unimpressive record. The result was predictable: a massive landslide for the Republicans. We will perform a “postmortem” on this crucial turn in our political culture.

Week Six: Reagan's White House Years

In our final gathering we will examine the many steps Reagan took to take the country in a radically different direction from the presidents over the past fifty years. We will look at both his domestic and foreign policies, and chart his successes and failures. Our guiding theme in this lecture will be that Reagan was both a savvy politician, a charismatic leader, and very lucky.