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**“Two Timing the Candidates: Carter’s *Playboy* Interview
and Complex Voters Perceptions in the 1976 Election”**

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Fought in the shadows of Vietnam and Watergate, the 1976 presidential election was dominated by rhetoric about renewing faith in politics, a discourse that makes a politically unconventional act like Democratic nominee Jimmy Carter’s *Playboy* interview all the more surprising and unusual. Intended to reassure liberals that his religion did not make him self-righteous, Carter’s discussion of faith, lust, and current affairs in *Playboy* underscored the idea that the presidential image was in flux, as the backlash against Richard Nixon and evolving social views on sex and morality to some extent rewrote the rules of political culture. As the social milieu of the 1970s grew more cynical and permissive, traditional notions of what voters expected and wanted from a candidate for the White House were somewhat changed, a phenomenon that aided Carter’s self-proclaimed outsider candidacy. However, as mixed reactions to the *Playboy* interview proved, the boundaries could only be stretched so far, as the criticisms of impropriety and voter confusion that Carter’s statements evoked effectively answered the question of how outside was too outside for the electorate. Published at the end of September, the *Playboy* interview ultimately forced Carter to seek out a middle road between new and old political images in the final month towards Election Day, introducing strategic burdens that made the interview and the reaction that it generated a turning point in the 1976 presidential campaign.

The issues and ideas at work during the 1976 election are perhaps best summed up by Carter's assessment that "this 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 from Washington, D.C."¹ While a bit of an overstatement, Carter's words nonetheless capture the force of public doubts about the morality of the American government and how Nixon's tarnished legacy shaped the rhetoric of the first post-Watergate campaign. Even after President Nixon's resignation in 1974, the electorate's trust of the executive branch still averaged at approximately 15 percent two years later, a reality that compelled an emphasis on image over issues as Republican President Gerald Ford and Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter both set out to exemplify honest and capable leadership.² Ford, appointed to the Vice-Presidency after Spiro Agnew's resignation in the wake of his own personal scandal, was in the peculiar position of not having been popularly elected and, though not implicated in Watergate, carried the taint of having granted Nixon a full pardon. In response to these concerns, Ford focused on distancing himself from scandal and embodying the image of a man restoring honor to the White House and faith to the American people.³ However, while he appeared morally sound, his claims of effective leadership rang somewhat hollow as the economy continued to suffer high inflation and an ongoing recession.⁴ For his part, Carter, a one-term governor from Georgia, picked up the economic issue, along with the legacy of Watergate, as his primary means of attack and encouraged voters to elect a Washington outsider like himself who would bring decency and competence back to the government.⁵ In a culture disillusioned not only by economic hardship

¹ Quoted in Kenneth E. Morris, Jimmy Carter: American Moralist (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 203.

² Morris, 208.

³ Paul F. Boller, Jr., Presidential Campaigns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 347.

⁴ Stephen J. Wayne, The Road to the White House: The Politics of Presidential Elections (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 241.

⁵ Myron A. Levine, Presidential Campaigns and Elections: Issues and Images in the Media Age (Itasea: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1995), 166.

and presidential scandal, but also continuing reverberations over the loss in Vietnam, this image held popular appeal and embodied Carter's feeling that "on one level we have the tangible issues-unemployment, welfare, taxation- but on another level we have the intangible issues of cynicism and apathy."⁶ As Carter's characterization acknowledges, the concerns of the electorate in 1976 were largely a union of the practical and the ideological, a blend that inspired a campaign centered around the fundamental question of who was the best man for the country both personally and professionally.

To a significant extent, the primary season was important for both Ford and Carter, as it was the means through which the candidates developed the tactical approaches that would serve them in the presidential race, as well as a harbinger of certain divisions at work in each party. On the Republican side, Ford faced a considerable challenge from Ronald Reagan and the conservative GOP faction that portrayed him as a weak incumbent who failed to command a national constituency. Plagued by the label of the "appointed President," Ford was widely perceived as an unexceptional politician who had simply gotten lucky and risen above the personal limitations summed up in his remark "I'm a Ford, not a Lincoln."⁷ Ford and Reagan faced off competitively in a number of states including New Hampshire, North Carolina, and Texas where the President depicted his challenger as an irresponsible right-wing ideologue who the Democrats would easily defeat in the election.⁸ In order to contrast this image, Ford focused throughout the primaries on appearing Presidential and maintaining a moderate stance on the issues, an approach designed to target weak Democrats and independents.⁹ It was these groups that he continued to keep in mind after narrowly winning the Republican nomination and

⁶ Quoted in Morris, 202.

⁷ Quoted in Levine, 164

⁸ Victor Bondi, ed., *American Decades: 1970-79* (Detroit:Gale Research Inc., 1995), 259.

⁹ Levine, 165.

evolving his tactics from the primaries into the “Rose Garden strategy” for the general election. Modeled off recommendations from the Bailey and Deardourff public relations firm, the Rose Garden strategy entailed promoting Ford through the performance of his executive duties at the White House, essentially a strategy of choreographed photo-ops intended to, as characterized by historian Stephen J. Wayne, “maximize the office’s ‘rub-off’ effect” and “highlight the incumbent-challenger contrast.”¹⁰ Ford’s chief concern was to appear to be a man in control, one who knew the Presidency and could be trusted with it on a day-to-day basis, as voters could plainly see for themselves as they watched him holding press conferences or signing legislation. In this regard, Ford’s strategy was to legitimize his candidacy through an appeal to patriotic sensibilities rather than strict party loyalties, a tactic that held particular resonance in the midst of the bicentennial year and national desires for a post-Watergate healing.

In terms of the Democrats, the primaries were Jimmy Carter’s opportunity to prove a legitimate and viable candidate for a party whose liberal and conservative constituencies remained somewhat polarized in the aftermath of Vietnam. As Democrats on either side looked unenthusiastically to traditional standard bearers like Edward Kennedy and George Wallace, practicality argued that the Democrats needed a new candidate who could simultaneously appeal to the left and right wing sensibilities that such figures embodied.¹¹ Both Carter and his campaign manager Hamilton Jordan appreciated how the proliferation of primaries in recent electoral history had transformed the nominating process, broadening the prospects for the emergence of a dark horse figure who could win the nomination by winning the battle for media attention at the outset. With the rise of primaries came the rise of a media spectacle focused on ferreting out “winners” and “losers” from among the entrants, conditions under which Jordan

¹⁰ Wayne, 200.

¹¹ Bondi, 259.

reasoned that Carter could achieve front-runner status with good showings early on that separated him from the crowd.¹² The emphasis was on running hard and fast from the start and achieving credibility by exceeding expectations, a careful manipulation of public perceptions that Jordan aptly summed up before the New Hampshire primary: “It has already been established in the minds of the national press that Mo Udall is going to do well in New Hampshire...If he does not win in New Hampshire, I think now by the measuring criteria that the press is going to apply, he will have underperformed. Well, we’d never talk about winning in New Hampshire. We never talk about winning anywhere. We talk about doing well.”¹³ By playing down Carter’s chances, Jordan effectively made his wins in Iowa and New Hampshire the media events that the press was looking for, as Carter’s seemingly unexpected victories became the story that dominated the political scene. In the midst of a frenzy of publicity that put him on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, Carter reinforced expectations that he was the man to beat by defeating George Wallace in Florida, a win that confirmed his image as a new and more respectable voice for the South.¹⁴ As would be the case in the general election, the rise of Jimmy Carter in the Democratic primaries was perceived as the rise of the Washington outsider and even later losses against more established politicians like “Scoop” Jackson and Jerry Brown did not curtail Carter’s momentum.¹⁵ With the backing of most of his former opponents, Carter won the Democratic nomination and, like Ford, went into the general election planning to balance between conservative and liberal viewpoints in hopes of assuaging the divisions at work within his party.

¹² Levine, 162.

¹³ Quoted in Wayne, 106.

¹⁴ Levine, 163.

¹⁵ Wayne, 104.

At the time that he emerged as the Democratic front-runner in May, Carter was already polling ahead of Ford as well as remaining Democrats, a lead over the President that he maintained by approximately 15 points as the campaign approached Labor Day.¹⁶ Even more so than during the primaries, Carter continued to emphasize his image as a fresh, people-oriented candidate rather than specific policy issues, a choice of focus readily asserted in his comment that Presidents Dewey, Goldwater, and McGovern were the only ones to his knowledge who had highlighted the issues.¹⁷ The Carter campaign's primary intention was to stake out a centrist position and stress different things to different people, playing upon variations of the moral and reflective Baptist persona that had already secured him support in the South.¹⁸ In this approach, liberals were a particular area of concern, for although the Democrats expected running mate Mondale to help the party's chances in the East and West, Jordan did not want Carter boxed into a singularly rural and conservative base and consequently advocated for flexibility and overtures towards the Left throughout the campaign.¹⁹ In the assessment of how to reach out to liberals, Carter's religion constituted the chief area of focus, as advisors considered his Baptist beliefs the subject most likely to stall liberal support for the Democratic ticket.²⁰ As the source of his self-proclaimed moral character, Carter's religion regularly found its way into his campaign rhetoric and caused journalists like Peter Goldman to characterize him as "the most unabashed moralist to seek the Presidency since William Jennings Bryan."²¹ Aides such as Jordan were keen to realize that this depiction would hinder Carter among those who perceived organized religion as rigid and unbending and distrusted its use in the making of governmental decisions. Caught in what

¹⁶ Author unknown, "Those Fluttering, Stuttering Polls," *Time*, 108 (October 25, 1976), 19.

¹⁷ Wayne, 205.

¹⁸ Boller, 343.

¹⁹ Wayne, 176.

²⁰ Leo P. Ribuffo, "Election of 1976," *Running for President: The Candidates and Their Images*, ed. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., (2 vols., New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 367.

²¹ Peter Goldman, "Sizing Up Carter," *Newsweek*, 88 (September 13, 1976), 34.

George Gallup Jr. referred to as “the year of the evangelical,” secular Americans were somewhat fearful that the election of a born-again Baptist might adversely influence their private lives, a concern for which historian Paul J. Boller Jr. notes that Carter “felt continually obliged to prove that he was utterly human despite his religion.”²² To avoid alienating more liberal sectors such as the North, the onus on Carter was to present his religion as a factor that informed rather than dictated his thinking and did not cause him to condemn the beliefs of others, a task that, for all intents and purposes, led to the *Playboy* interview.

Published at the end of September, the *Playboy* interview was the culmination of approximately three months of conversations conducted at spare moments along the campaign trail between Carter and journalist Robert Scheer. Accompanied by *Playboy* editor Barry Golson, Scheer, a self-proclaimed “aggressive Berkley radical,” had done political interviews for the magazine in the past, including one with Carter’s primaries opponent Jerry Brown, and in this case managed to secure more time with Carter than *Time* and *Newsweek* combined.²³ The finished product addressed all manner of topics, from foreign policy issues such as involvement in Vietnam and détente with the Russians to more personal ones like the nature of Carter’s religious faith and the criticism that he was fuzzy on the issues. Throughout his responses, Carter condemned the misguided stereotyping of his character and stressed the flexibility of his beliefs, commenting at one point that “I’m a human being. I’m not a packaged article that you can put in a little box and say, ‘Here’s a Southern Baptist, an ignorant Georgian peanut farmer.’”²⁴ Among those misconceptions, Carter cited the feeling that his spiritual beliefs might control his decisions as president, a sentiment that he tried to assuage by describing religion as a

²² Boller, 343.

²³ Robert Scheer, “Playboy Interview: Jimmy Carter,” *Playboy*, Nov. 1976, 64.

²⁴ Scheer, 77.

matter of choice and prayer as “not something that’s conscious or formal,”²⁵ but merely an ordinary part of his daily life. Overall, Carter’s statements reflected a careful effort to appear nonjudgmental and disclaim any impression of self-righteousness working on the minds of secular voters. His final monologue, a meditation on Christ’s teachings about the dangers of pride and the condemnation of others using adultery as the central example, was Carter’s most explicit attempt to make his faith accessible to readers and embodied the overarching goal of reaching out to a liberal audience.

While a direct account of the choice to give the *Playboy* interview is largely lost to memoirs primarily focused on recounting the crises of the Carter Presidency, the decision is one that fits well with the strategy that Hamilton Jordan outlined for the campaign as a whole. Confident that a substantial lead could be established in the South early on, Jordan favored giving less attention to that region as the campaign progressed and using the post-Labor day push to target voter demographics whose support for Carter was less assured.²⁶ Beginning in September, Carter strove to make explicit links between his party’s New Deal legacy and himself, rallying at Franklin Roosevelt’s Little White House in Georgia and comparing himself to Truman while associating Ford with Hoover and Nixon.²⁷ These displays represent the fine-tuning of Carter’s image to attract the support of wary liberal Democrats, a technique that also resulted in the spin on his religious views presented in the *Playboy* interview. While discussing the strategic implications with editor Golson, campaign press secretary Jodi Powell indicated the Carter camp’s concern over losing the support of the magazine’s readership, noting “we wouldn’t do it if it weren’t in our interest. It’s your readers who are probably predisposed

²⁵ Scheer 67.

²⁶ Wayne, 176.

²⁷ Ribuffo, 369.

toward Jimmy- but they may not vote at all if they feel uneasy about him.”²⁸ Powell’s statement expressed the feeling that the young, dominantly male, liberals embodied in *Playboy*’s audience found it difficult to relate to Carter, a reaction most advisors considered rooted in public perceptions of his religious affiliation. Dubbed the “weirdo factor” by Jordan, Carter’s religiosity was somewhat tarnished by the recent rise of religious conservatism, a movement embodied in national religious-affiliated protests against *Roe v. Wade* that left secular voters feeling politically alienated and more prone to view a Baptist candidate with a critical eye.²⁹ The fear was that such individuals, conventionally aligned with the Democrats, would reject Carter on the religious issue alone unless he could make it accessible to them and prove that his beliefs did not create an irreconcilable rift between him and those who did not share them. To this end, Carter explained in the interview that his faith did not make him “assume the role of judge and say to another human being ‘you’re condemned because you commit sins,’” an idea that he reinforced with statements about adultery and the right to censure the transgressions of others.³⁰ It was in this context that Carter described lusting after women in his heart, an admission that attracted the most adverse attention in the mainstream media, but whose words and subject were ultimately pragmatic, designed according to Robert E. Denton Jr. and Dan F. Hahn to “portray him to the readers as a ‘normal healthy American male’” and “create a sense of commonality with the audience.”³¹ In many ways, Carter’s Baptist faith put him on a pedestal in the eyes of secular voters and his task in the *Playboy* interview was to debunk that notion of separateness and superiority, an aim that, if achieved, would hopefully secure the support of those liberals ambivalent towards him.

²⁸ Scheer, 64.

²⁹ Bondi, 451.

³⁰ Scheer, 66, 86.

³¹ Robert E. Denton and Dan F. Hahn, Presidential Communication: Description and Analysis (New York: Praeger Publishers Inc., 1986), 245.

To this end, the choice to give an interview to *Playboy* was an important strategic consideration in itself, an action that implicitly supported Carter's assertions that he was far from a fanatical and hard-nosed fundamentalist. With a monthly circulation of approximately six million during this period, *Playboy* enjoyed iconic status as American culture underwent a sexual revolution influenced by the 1960s counterculture and the idea of challenging old taboos and restraints.³² Since its founding in the 1950s, the magazine had grown to epitomize the liberalization of American society, harkening in an era of sexual candor in which Hefner's playmates became, in the words of journalist John Brady, "a symbol of disobedience, a triumph of sexuality, an end of puritanism."³³ Such a characterization effectively echoes the social values of Carter's target audience, describing a liberal progressive-mindedness of which Carter appeared tolerant by virtue of his willingness to treat *Playboy* as a legitimate news source. A glance at *Playboy*'s editorial content over the course of its existence hints at the frame of mind of its audience, as readers encountered contributions from such counterculture writers as Hunter S. Thompson and Jack Kerouac, as well as early excerpts from All the President's Men.³⁴ While one can persuasively argue that pornography was *Playboy*'s primary draw, the magazine's degree of social consciousness and in turn that of its readers should not be underestimated, as its articles create the impression that at least a portion of its audience was politically educated and perhaps motivated as well. In giving an interview to *Playboy*, Carter in effect endorsed the history of social revolution and political activism with which the magazine aligned itself both in its text and its images, sending a sign that he accepted the liberal voices that constituted its readership. In many ways then, the message and its forum proved inseparable, as Carter's words

³² Bondi, 328.

³³ John Brady, "Nude Journalism," *Journal of Popular Culture* (1975), 154.

³⁴ Brady, 158, 160.

were enhanced by the connotations that the magazine held in the American psyche, ensuring that the vehicle for the communication spoke to the public just as much as the communication itself.

When the *Playboy* interview was released to the press on September 23rd, it garnered significant media coverage due in part to *Playboy*'s efforts to promote the piece through Scheer's appearances on television shows such as *Today*.³⁵ For his part, Scheer gave positive reviews of what Carter had said, particularly the final monologue on adultery and judgment to which Scheer's initial thinking had been "For the first time, I'm getting the real Carter, he finally expressed himself in a way readers could respond to."³⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the segment about Carter lusting in his heart was the part that the media most focused on as well, attracted to the sensationalism of a presidential candidate discussing sexual urges in *Playboy* regardless of the context. Once again, the relationship between the words and the forum proved key, as the fact of where the statements appeared effectively made the media story in a way that would not have been true if they were published in another magazine. Indeed, in the ensuing debate over the *Playboy* interview, writer Doris Kearns pointed out that while talking with Carter in the course of research for a magazine profile he had said "just about the same thing he did to *Playboy*-and in the same context," though Carter's remarks in that instance obviously did not command a comparable degree of attention.³⁷ The force of *Playboy*'s popular culture connotations essentially gave the media the power to make Carter's discussion of such ideas comedic and a political gaffe, an effect epitomized in subsequent bumper stickers that read "In his heart, he knows your wife" and political cartoons of Carter looking suggestively at a naked Statue of Liberty.³⁸ The challenge to the Carter campaign then was to fight this contextual effect

³⁵ Jules Witcover, *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency, 1972-1976* (New York: Viking Press, 1977), 567.

³⁶ David Gelman, "The Great Playboy Furor," *Newsweek*, 88 (October 4, 1976), 70.

³⁷ Quoted in Gelman, 71.

³⁸ Author unknown, "Trying to be One of the Boys," *Time*, 108 (October 4, 1976), 34.

and retrieve the intellectual weight that Carter's words might have enjoyed if published elsewhere, an aim that resulted in spin focused on the soundness of Carter's theological reasoning.³⁹ In addition, the campaign also attempted to use the interview to emphasize the virtues of Carter's outsider image and the fact that he did not adhere to politics as usual, an angle summed up in Mondale's response that "one of the most refreshing things about Carter is that he answers questions that he's asked."⁴⁰ In spite of these efforts, the *Playboy* interview largely proved to be a source of negative publicity that Carter's camp combated to the best of its ability in the period leading up to the first presidential debate, ultimately hoping to preserve some of its original message in the midst of media scrutiny.

What is interesting about the *Playboy* interview is that, as critical as the forum of Carter's statements was to the media's coverage of them, the issue was not as explicitly present in the subsequent public reaction. To be sure, Carter's decision to speak to *Playboy* did garner condemnation from some sectors, particularly religious officials whose typical remarks are summed up by Alabama pastor Jerry Vines' assessment that "*Playboy* is known for its gutter approach to life and its whole philosophy comes right from the barnyard."⁴¹ As overt as such attacks on the magazine and Carter's implied approval of it were, statements along those lines were primarily confined to individuals with right-wing leanings who were admittedly unlikely to vote for Carter anyway. On the whole, the response of the general public was largely free of scathing attacks on *Playboy*, a reality that reflected changing attitudes towards sexuality and morality in 1970s America. In a time of growing sexual experimentation and promiscuity, an interview in *Playboy* did not necessarily spell the end of a candidate's chances for the

³⁹ Witcover, 567.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Lee Dembart, "Carter's Comments on Sex Cause Concern," *New York Times* (September 23, 1976), A36.

⁴¹ Quoted in Witcover, 568.

Presidency, as the increased visibility and acceptance of pornography into the mainstream occurred, according to historian Victor Bondi, “without the hand-wringing and guilt that formerly characterized American attitudes towards sex.”⁴² Also of note was the fact that, in a post-Vietnam and Watergate political culture, voters were judging Carter’s actions against what they deemed the “typical politics” of maligned figures like Johnson and Nixon, a perspective that made a politically unconventional act like the *Playboy* interview acceptable and perhaps even appealing. What the reaction to the interview essentially revealed was that, disappointed over the secretive and corrupt character of recent political life, the public was in the process of reevaluating the presidential image, a phenomenon that the *Playboy* interview exposed in a way that made it a turning point in the campaign.

With its heightened focus on candidate images, the 1976 election admittedly involved a discourse on what being “presidential” entailed, as the public’s experiences of being deceived and misled by recent presidents inspired a reconsideration of what standards should be used to evaluate candidates for the office. To a certain extent, the appeal of Jimmy Carter the outsider signaled a bending of the rules, a kind of acknowledgment that an interview in *Playboy* did not make someone unfit for the presidency because, as contemporary history had shown, not giving such an interview offered no guarantees either. It was in this context, what pollster Daniel Yankelovich characterized as “a strong dose of realism in the public mood,” that Carter’s action was permissible, though simultaneously criticized in a fashion that revealed the interplay between the old and new expectations facing Presidential contenders.⁴³ As the success of Ford’s Rose Garden strategy demonstrated, Vietnam and Watergate had not entirely eliminated public esteem for the Oval Office and, while voters responded well to a candidate like Carter who was

⁴² Bondi, 329.

⁴³ Daniel Yankelovich, “What the Voters Want,” *The New Republic* 175 (October 23, 1976), 17.

not a typical political player, there were still traditional standards by which he was being judged. Notably, the primary objection chronicled in the media's coverage of public reaction to the interview was that Carter's thoughts on adultery were inappropriate or did not have a place in presidential politics, an opinion captured in one Atlanta woman's comment that "I felt it was a little beneath Presidential dignity and not very smart to do it publicly. I also thought 'oh Lord, now the President is going to start preaching about lust in your heart!'"⁴⁴ Carter's campaign was predicated on the idea of being out of place in politics, but what the *Playboy* interview showed was how out of place was too much so, a revelation that forced Carter to refocus in order to find a balance between a conventional candidacy and an outsider one. Throughout the campaign, the danger of the outsider persona was that it would push the limits of political custom further than public views had evolved and consequently make Carter too foreign to voters, a risk that columnist Meg Greenfield captured in her opinion following the *Playboy* interview that Carter was fashioning himself "as an eccentric, a stranger to common experience, a man whose 'we' becomes increasingly unfamiliar and uncomfortable in its implications."⁴⁵ Greenfield's assessment also strikes at the reality that, while to some degree lenient in their application of traditional standards for presidential candidates, voters nonetheless wanted a clear picture of who the candidate was, a stipulation that Carter had failed to meet thus far and only continued to do so with the *Playboy* interview. While explicit denunciations of *Playboy* were not prevalent in the public's response, the forum still triggered associations that underscored a basic incompatibility between how Carter was perceived as a Baptist and his statements about lust, playing into the feeling summed up by *Time* that, even this far into the campaign, Carter remained "an enigma, a kind of populist Hamlet whose cross-purposes and mixed signals have so jammed the nation's

⁴⁴ Quoted in Dembart, 36.

⁴⁵ Meg Greenfield, "Carter's Real Blunder," *Newsweek* 88 (October 11, 1976), 120.

sensory network that little more than static has emerged on the receiving end.”⁴⁶ In each of these respects, the *Playboy* interview was in essence a breaking point of tensions concerning both voter uncertainties about the standards by which to judge the candidates and Carter himself, thereby bringing the Carter campaign to a moment at which it was compelled to effectively deal with these issues at work in the mind of the electorate.

Among Carter’s managers, the public reaction to the *Playboy* interview was considered emblematic of wider voter concerns, as well as their general feeling that the campaign had lost direction, a framework revealed in Jodi Powell’s comment that “seen as a part of the larger problem it [the interview] was important, no doubt about that.”⁴⁷ While 53 percent of those polled in *Newsweek* said that the *Playboy* interview would not affect their vote, the interview was significant in terms of the slow erosion of Carter’s 15 point lead over Ford that occurred throughout September.⁴⁸ In the course of reassessing their strategy, Carter’s managers considered what the reaction to the *Playboy* interview revealed about the sentiments behind such numbers and focused in on the fact that Carter was lacking the cohesiveness of theme and focus that had brought him success in the primaries. In some respects, the strategy of targeting certain groups with specifically tailored appeals in the post-Labor Day push had drowned out Carter’s principal rhetoric of moral and competent government and aroused feelings of voter confusion and contradiction that the interview only augmented.⁴⁹ As voters considered precisely what an outsider candidacy meant and what standards should be applied in judging qualification for the office, the burden on Carter was to present a clear and unambiguous image and his failure to do so essentially climaxed with the *Playboy* interview. As the apparent epitome of mixed messages,

⁴⁶ Author unknown, “Jimmy’s Mixed Signals,” *Time* 108 (October 4, 1976), 27.

⁴⁷ Quoted in James T. Wooten, “Carter Seeks to Regain Original Flavor of Campaign,” *New York Times* (October 2, 1976), A1.

⁴⁸ David M. Alperin, “The Race: Stay Tuned,” *Newsweek* 88 (October 4, 1976), 22.

⁴⁹ Eleanor Clift and Peter Goldman, “Mr. Outside in Stride,” *Newsweek* 88 (November 1, 1976), 30.

the interview exacerbated the frustrations of an already anxious electorate and their feelings that, again in the words of columnist Greenfield, Carter was “too good to be true, and so the question arises: is he a weirdo or is he putting us on?”⁵⁰ In running a campaign that was allowed to be unconventional in some regards, Carter nonetheless confronted certain limitations on how much unconventionality the electorate could reconcile with what it traditionally expected from its politicians. Sensing a little give to the usual rules, Carter fashioned an outsider candidacy that, as voter perceptions were being reframed, required a balancing of the familiar and the progressive, a pressure that the *Playboy* interview brought to the forefront. Alerted to the fact that their recent strategy had pushed their progressive side too far, the Carter campaign engaged in a concerted effort to come back inside by renewing the focus on Ford’s failed leadership and the faltering economy.⁵¹ The Carter rhetoric in the final month towards Election Day was a revival of the playable themes of the primaries and embodied a careful consideration of the tension between new and old political ideas embedded in responses to the *Playboy* interview. With this design, Carter ultimately prevailed over Ford by a slim electoral margin of 297 to 240 in spite of continuing criticism that voters had not developed an intimate sense of his character. Reflecting on this analysis following the win, Hamilton Jordan acknowledged that the President-elect was an elusive figure, commenting “but Jimmy Carter is always going to be somewhat the issue with people who don’t know much about him. He’s a more complex man than most politicians.”⁵² Indeed, during the 1976 election, complexity was present in a number of regards, most notably in the mindset of the electorate as voters actively reevaluated how they looked at Presidential candidates, a trend captured in the reaction to the *Playboy* interview in such as way

⁵⁰ Greenfield, 120.

⁵¹ Author unknown, “Carter Fights the Big-League Slump,” *Time* 108 (October 11, 1976), 19.

⁵² Quoted in author unknown, “Engineering the Victory,” *Time* 108 (November 15, 1976), 32.

as to change how the Carter campaign dealt with these complexities in order to win the Presidency in 1976.

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