

## Jimmy Carter: The National Crisis of Confidence (1979)

*During the first half of 1979, various indicators pointed to economic problems for the United States – including spiraling inflation and unemployment and, as a consequence, political problems for the Carter administration. Unpleasant shocks added to widespread uneasiness. In March, an accident at the nuclear power station at Three Mile Island, near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, reminded Americans that atomic energy carried serious risks. An energy crisis originating overseas brought gasoline shortages and higher prices, angering many, especially motorists in long lines at service stations.*

*President Carter (b. 1924), who during April had proposed to Congress measures to deal with future energy needs, planned to address the nation regarding energy at the beginning of July. Instead, he retired to the Camp David presidential retreat, where for several days he consulted with public and private figures about problems confronting the nation. Carter then spoke to the nation of July 15. His address, “Energy and National Goals,” dealt not only with America’s energy crisis but also with the “crisis of confidence.” For Carter, worse was still to come, of course, in Iran and Afghanistan.*

Sources: Excerpt from *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1979, Book 2, June 23 to December 31, 1979* (Washington D.C. U.S. Government Printing Office, 1980), 1236-1241. Permission is granted for electronic copying, distribution in print form for educational purposes and personal use.

So, I want to speak to you first tonight about a subject even more serious than energy or inflation. I want to talk to you right now about a fundamental threat to American democracy.

I do not mean our political and civil liberties. They will endure. And I do not refer to the outward strength of America, a nation that is at peace tonight everywhere in the world, with unmatched economic power and military might.

The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways.

It is a crisis of confidence.

It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation.

The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.

The confidence that we have always had as a people is not simply some romantic dream or a proverb in a dusty book that we read just on the Fourth of July. It is the idea which founded our nation and has guided our development as a people.

Confidence in the future has supported everything else -- public institutions and private enterprise, our own families, and the very Constitution of the United States. Confidence has defined our course and has served as a link between generations. We’ve always believed in something called progress. We’ve always had a faith that the days of our children would be better than our own.

Our people are losing that faith, not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy. As a people we know our past and we are proud of it. Our progress has been part of the living history of America, even the world. We always believed that we were part of a great movement of humanity itself called democracy, involved in the search for freedom; and that belief has always strengthened us in our purpose. But just as we are losing our confidence in the future, we are also beginning to close the door on our past.

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we’ve discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We’ve learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us. For the first time in the history of our country a

majority of our people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years. Two-thirds of our people do not even vote. The productivity of American workers is actually dropping, and the willingness of Americans to save for the future has fallen below that of all other people in the Western world.

As you know, there is a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions. This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning.

These changes did not happen overnight. They’ve come upon us gradually over the last generation, years that were filled with shocks and tragedy.

We were sure that ours was a nation of the ballot, not the bullet, until the murders of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. We were taught that our armies were always invincible and our causes were always just, only to suffer the agony of Vietnam. We respected the Presidency as a place of honor until the shock of Watergate...

Energy will be the immediate test of our ability to unite this nation, and it can also be the standard around which we rally. On the battlefield of energy we can win for our nation a new confidence, and we can seize control again of our common destiny.

In little more than two decades we’ve gone from a position of energy independence to one in which almost half the oil we use comes from foreign countries, at prices that are going through the roof. Our excessive dependence on OPEC has already taken a tremendous toll on our economy and our people. This is the direct cause of the long lines which have made millions of you spend aggravating hours waiting for gasoline. It’s a cause of the increased inflation and unemployment that we now face. This intolerable dependence on foreign oil threatens our economic independence and the very security of our nation.

The energy crisis is real. It is worldwide. It is a clear and present danger to our nation. These are facts and we simply must face them...

In closing, let me say this: I will do my best, but I will not do it alone. Let your voice be heard. Whenever you have a chance, say something good about our country. With God’s help and for the sake of our nation, it is time for us to join hands in America. Let us commit ourselves together to a rebirth of the American spirit. Working together with our common faith we cannot fail.

Thank you and good night.

### Questions:

1. What evidence did Carter offer to support his argument that the American people were experiencing a “crisis of confidence”?
2. In his view, why was the crisis of confidence a much deeper problem than the shortage of energy, inflation, and the recession?
3. What did Carter propose to do to resolve the crisis of confidence? How do you think the American people—and the American voters—responded to this speech?