

The anniversary of malaise

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 20, 2009 NCR Today

Most of us read political columnists for insights and inside information not for literary quality. Hendrick Hertzberg's columns and blog posts at *The New Yorker* are one of the few venues where we can find all three. A seasoned journalist and master wordsmith, Hertzberg is always worth reading.

Never more so than on the topic he recently addressed, [the 30th anniversary of President Jimmy Carter's famous and infamous 'malaise' speech](#), [1] which has the distinction of being known to history by a word that never once passed Carter's lips that evening. Hertzberg's take is especially interesting because he was Carter's chief speechwriter at the time.

Much has happened since 1979. What has not yet happened is the thing Carter talked about, reducing our nation's dependence on foreign oil. In fact, things have gotten worse since that time. Reaganomics, once appropriately dubbed voodoo economics by George H.W. Bush, taught us that consumption was good for the economy, that lower taxes yielded more government tax revenues, and that the classic choice between guns and butter could be set aside as the citizenry acquiesced in the decision to insist on both, the consequences be damned. We now live with the consequences of Reaganomics and they are certainly damnable. The feel-good Reagan and Clinton years, when our leaders choose to feed the nation's appetites rather than address its problems, saw the advent of more uninsured, bigger SUVs, and a shrinking ozone layer.

It is a commonplace to suggest that Jimmy Carter was an unsuccessful president but that he is the nation's most successful ex-president. Certainly, the Carter Center has done great things in terms of monitoring elections and other notable efforts. But, Carter's increasing hostility to Israel, which has led him to view terrorist organizations like Hamas with all the clear-headedness that Reagan brought to tax issues, has marred his post-presidency. And, as we still find ourselves without a coherent national energy policy, it is the Carter presidency, and specifically the so-called 'malaise' speech, that rings true. He may not have been a great president but he was a prescient one.

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[1] <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/hendrikhertzberg/2009/07/carter-malaise.html>