The rivalry for the White House took on its final form immediately after the last primary. The conventions were still more than a month away, but it was already clear that Carter and Reagan would represent their parties, while Anderson seemed determined to stay in the race until the end. The politicking that ensued during the intense campaigning of late 1980 demonstrates in the starkest terms what happens when rhetoric runs up against heresthetic.

Rival Strategy Documents: June 1980

Pat Caddell and Richard Wirthlin played important roles in the 1976 and 1980 presidential campaigns of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. These two pollsters and strategists authored strategy documents for their candidates after the primaries ended in June, and watched closely as the campaigns implemented their strategies in the months that followed. Meanwhile, David Garth, a media specialist, and others were
helping Anderson to make the transition from GOP contender to an independent candidacy.

Surveys revealed that Reagan was substantially ahead of Carter after the primaries. In a Gallup Poll presidential trial heat conducted in late June, 41 percent of registered voters surveyed said they would select Carter as president, while 46 percent chose Reagan. Fully 58 percent of those surveyed disapproved of Carter’s job performance. Despite these promising indicators, Wirthlin advised Reagan and his staff to prepare for a real fight: to capture “must win” states they had to develop an issue package that would create and sustain a diverse coalition of voters.

To capture the presidency, a candidate must win 270 of the total 538 electoral votes. Wirthlin had Reagan leading in the East and the West, although his western advantage was vulnerable to a challenge from Anderson. Concerned as he was about the Anderson threat, Wirthlin felt that the third-party candidate took a bigger bite of the Carter vote than he did of Reagan’s. The major-party battle would be closer in the South and the Midwest, however, and Reagan might have to split the vote with Carter in those regions. Then Wirthlin analyzed the situation in small, medium, and large electoral states.

The seven states with 20 or more electoral votes—California, Illinois, Texas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Michigan—held a total of 211 votes, of which Reagan needed a minimum of 107 according to Wirthlin’s calculations. Victories in California, Illinois, and at least two of the other four would lock up 117 electoral votes for Reagan. But California was the only safe bet in this group according to Wirthlin, whereas both New York and Michigan might have to be written off.

The states in the medium-size category (those with 10 or more electoral votes) controlled a total of 161 votes, with the top four—Indiana, Wisconsin, Virginia, and New Jersey—accounting for 53. In order to obtain the 82 electoral votes he needed from this group, Reagan would have to win not only all of these four, but also at least three of the others, Missouri, Tennessee, Florida, and Maryland. Wirthlin considered Wisconsin and New Jersey to be uncertain, at best, however, and warned that Reagan’s lack of a strong base in this category would require him to make up the electoral difference from among large and small states.

Reagan also needed at least 84 of the 166 electoral votes controlled by small states (those with nine or fewer electoral votes). A Reagan victory in Idaho, South Dakota, Wyoming, Vermont, Utah, Nebraska,
North Dakota, New Hampshire, Kansas, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Arizona, Oregon, Alaska, and Iowa, and three of the four following states—Colorado, Washington, Maine, and Connecticut—would give him the electoral votes he needed in this category.

Wirthlin hoped that Reagan would garner more than the minimum from each group. His “best coalition of states” would give Reagan 149 electoral votes from large states, 62 from medium states, and 91 from small states, for a total of 302 and a 32-vote margin of victory. A broad coalition, held together by a compelling message, would be necessary to achieve this ambitious goal.

Reagan’s pollster reported that 30 percent of voters identified themselves as Republican, 51 percent as Democrat, and 19 percent as independent. In addition to traditional Republicans, weak Republicans, and ticket-splitters, Wirthlin suggested that the Reagan campaign target “metropolitan, blue collar, ethnics,” those in “rural areas in the non-south,” and “disaffected white Southern Protestant voter[s] to reinforce our foothold in the South.”

Wirthlin also urged the targeting of single-issue voters—conservative Republicans who were staunchly opposed to abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, the Panama Canal treaties, or gun control. These voters were an important element of Reagan’s base, and could be kept in his camp through the deployment of “appropriate messages.” However, Wirthlin discouraged the campaign from relying on these ideological issues again, as it had done in 1976, believing that they were no longer the subject of widespread voter interest in 1980.

Instead, convinced that the American economy was the main issue in the 1980 race, Wirthlin advised putting forth “a comprehensive, credible, proprietary economic program.” He added, “It must be identified as the Reagan plan and must never be referenced in whole or in part to Jack Kemp’s economics.” The Reagan economic plan would need to be publicized as soon as possible so that Carter would not be able to undercut it before the fall campaigning got under way. Credibility could be established by obtaining endorsements of the plan by some of the nation’s leading economists.

Meanwhile, Reagan’s foreign and defense policy should be based around a peace plan to avoid the perception that a Reagan presidency “would increase rather than decrease the chances of war.” Although Wirthlin did not suggest emphasizing specific defense issues, he noted the importance of assuring voters that the United States could effectively manage the costs of increased defense spending. After all, Reagan
had already told voters that guns-versus-butter trade-offs had no place in his defense and economic policies.

Carter’s man, Pat Caddell, took a much more pessimistic position in a draft of an election strategy he wrote. The task that lay ahead of the Carter campaign was staggering, he wrote: “President Carter faces an extremely difficult reelection. Struggling against a persistent defeated primary challenger [Ted Kennedy], we face a united Republican party with a challenger posed to our right attempting to crowd our center. To our left, we face an Independent candidacy raiding our unhappy left leaning base and threatening the key electoral vote rich industrial belt. . . . A two front assault is of great concern.”

The Anderson and Reagan challenges were not Carter’s only problems. Caddell was blunt: “Except for a weakened South, Carter has no real base, particularly when it comes to Democratic constituencies. Little enthusiasm.” In effect, Caddell concluded that the absence of a sound base was rooted in the same problem Carter had encountered in the 1976 election, when he won with a mere 50.1 percent of the popular vote and 297 electoral votes to Ford’s 48.0 percent and 240 electoral votes. Nonwhites had given Carter 85 percent of their vote in 1976, but they were the only segment of society to have supported him in such large numbers. Support from Jews, liberals, and urban Catholics had helped put the Georgia Democrat over the top, but Ford had outperformed him among independents and suburban Catholics. “In short,” Caddell advised, “we must have essentially a Southern strategy and a Northern blue collar, liberal, suburban strategy. Blacks and Catholics become essential, Jews and Browns important.”

Implicit in this summary was a recognition that Carter faced the same regional problems in 1980 that had almost cost him the 1976 race. In the 1980 primaries, Caddell recalled, “Carter basically repeated his 1976 performance—winning the South, doing well in the Midwest and being defeated decisively in the Atlantic Eastern states and California.” In short, his electoral prospects had eroded during his four years in the White House.

Carter’s pollster complained that the campaign was also repeating one of its worst 1976 errors by failing to put forward a strategic message. He wrote, “In 1976 neither side set the definition [of the election]—in fact neither side was all that cognizant of the framework.” He added, “At the moment, the 1980 campaign is adrift—searching for a definition.”

Caddell exhorted his colleagues to undertake “conceptual strate-
gies” and eschew negative campaigning. At the same time, he encouraged the campaign’s exploitation of mistakes made by the Anderson and Reagan campaigns, and urged the Carter team to attack Reagan’s proposals, especially his tax reduction plan: “In his [Reagan’s] record and his campaign,” Caddell advised, “he is open to assault on a host of positions and ideas not the least of which is Kemp/Roth. Enough concern can be raised over these to inflict substantial damage.” A Republican strategist was quoted in the Wall Street Journal in May 1980 as saying, “Politicians have seen that negative works, and most will have a go at it.”

The Rose Garden strategy was the final element in Caddell’s plan. Carter was urged to run on his record of managing the United States in an uncertain international environment rocked by successive energy crises and the Iranian hostage standoff, among other problems. Instead of offering a conceptual strategy and definition for Carter’s 1980 bid, Caddell was largely outlining rhetorical measures.

Caddell was confident that the Reagan camp would not put forth a conceptual strategy. He surmised, “It is unlikely Reagan will attempt the effort [of defining the election] for I don’t think he or his people conceptually understand the process. This is our opportunity.”

The Carter camp’s opportunity depended on carrying the maximum number of states. Of the South’s 139 electoral votes, Carter would need 110, along with 66 votes from small and medium states, including Hawaii, 19 electoral votes from Wisconsin and Connecticut, 27 from Pennsylvania, either New York’s 41 or California’s 45 votes, and either Iowa’s eight or Washington’s nine votes. This combination would yield 271 total electoral votes (or 276 if Carter took California instead of New York and Washington instead of Iowa). In either case, the incumbent would barely make it over the finish line.

With the race so close, the Midwest and Northeast were particularly coveted by both pollsters, and their respective candidates would devote much attention to these regions in the months ahead, albeit with very different appeals.

Anderson undertook a “Midwest strategy” as soon as he launched his campaign on June 8, 1979. He and his aides recognized that his best chance to make a respectable showing in the Republican primaries lay in the Midwest and the Northeast: if their candidate was unable to make a strong showing in these regions, he was unlikely to succeed anywhere else. As one of Anderson’s strategists reminded him in a July 1979 memo:
The Midwest is not only your home, but the home of the Party and its ideals. . . . The strength of the Midwestern commitment to moderate Republicanism has been shown in the area in its recent elections. The area is central not only geographically, but emotionally as well. Issues and solutions, which are accepted in the Midwest will have a large degree of acceptability throughout the U.S.

The memo identified Michigan and Ohio as essential components in this strategy, but also urged what its author called “geographic concentration” in other parts of the Midwest and some New England states. In addition to Michigan and Ohio, the list included New Hampshire, Illinois, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Connecticut, Vermont, Indiana, and Missouri.

The memo also suggested that Anderson forgo a southern strategy or any attempt to focus on southern delegates: “We must be careful that our terminology is not equated with the old Southern Strategy, which was perceived as a sort of immoral plan to capitalize on the weaknesses of our electoral system. Accordingly, we should not play up the strength of 457 delegates.”

Another memo by the same strategist, issued just a few weeks earlier, had recommended that Anderson eschew negative campaigning in favor of an upbeat tone. Sounding like Ronald Reagan, the strategist suggested:

Let’s not talk to the American people about sacrifice and belt tightening; they are sick of it. Ours is a society of opportunity not limitation. If there is something that must be done the American people will do it. . . . We can and should inspire the people to meet today’s responsibilities and tomorrow’s obligations, but material martyrdom has never been a part of the American ethic.

It is intriguing to wonder how Anderson might have fared if he had taken this advice and chosen to compete with Reagan for the “politics of more” space that the governor was carving out for himself. Instead, the Illinois congressman’s campaign more closely resembled Carter’s, warning that the nation would have to make sacrifices in order to revive the economy, and that defense spending and other government outlays would have to be cut back.
In April 1980, the month that Anderson announced as an independent, media specialist David Garth officially joined the Anderson campaign as its chief strategist. Garth wanted Anderson to capture traditional Democratic voters (blacks, Jews, city dwellers, and laborers) and to build upon Anderson’s growing appeal among young professionals and liberal Republicans, two groups that both Carter and Reagan would need in order to win.

Garth warned that the only way to win these blocs over was through caution. He advised Anderson to refrain from making any major policy pronouncements or accepting most national media requests in order to avoid peaking before the fall campaign began. At the same time, he encouraged Anderson to grant local interviews as he campaigned aggressively throughout the country. Garth advised a negative campaign against Anderson’s two major contenders, but suggested that the attacks should be couched in broad terms that were consistent with the congressman’s known positions on the issues. Garth did put his stamp on the campaign, but as Mark Bisnow, one of Anderson’s closest advisers in the late 1970s, observed, “Ultimately Anderson had too independent a will to be muzzled.”

By Labor Day, it was clear to Garth that his strategy of carefully avoiding the major policy issues had failed to generate much momentum for Anderson’s candidacy. Instead, Anderson began discussing specifics. He spoke out against the MX missile and in favor of federal budget cuts and a gas tax. Like Carter, he called for national sacrifice. In essence, he had reverted to the positions he had endorsed as a Republican presidential candidate earlier in the year without ever having run the kind of positive campaign that his adviser had suggested to him over the course of the summer. As Bisnow noted, once the congressman began repeating his original positions, many of his supporters reluctantly concluded that Anderson could not win.

Reagan declined an invitation to speak at the NAACP convention in Miami on July 4, 1980, due to a scheduling problem. Carter, who did attend, took the opportunity to get in a jab at Reagan: “As you can see, I did not have any trouble accepting my invitation to come to the NAACP convention.” He reviewed his record of appointing minorities and women to the federal bench and discussed plans to revitalize cities
and provide training and jobs for young people. Carter reminded his audience that “in Zimbabwe we stood firm for majority rule. . . . Zimbabwe is now free, democratic, and independent.” He also reaffirmed the United States’ commitment to defeat what he called Iranian terrorism.¹⁰

Reagan’s absence was an easy target, but Carter’s swipe did not automatically convince the convention-goers that he was the best candidate on race issues. As the New York Times reported the next day, “The President was warmly applauded by the 1,000 delegates and guests, but his reception was substantially less enthusiastic than the one given earlier this week to his opponent for the Democratic Presidential nomination, Senator Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts.”¹¹

Carter clearly enjoyed better standing among black voters than Reagan did, but this was hardly enough. The president’s rhetorical message to the NAACP had the characteristic ring of pessimism:

I cannot promise you everything will be better from this moment forward, that there will be no more sacrifice, because there will; no more delay in meeting treasured goals, because there’s going to be delay. And I will not lie to you and say that all is right in the world, because it’s not, or all right in our Nation, because it’s not. . . . So, I just want to tell it to you straight. This is a time of controversy. This is a time of impatience. This is a time of pain. This is a time of struggle. But most of all, this is a time of making decisions.

Carter’s sober message was the antithesis of Reagan’s optimism. Loyal Democrats that so many of them were, African-Americans would deliver the majority of their votes to Carter on Election Day. But his message of sacrifice and national suffering did not help him win the hearts—or votes—of those Democrats who were frustrated with the candidate or his party.

---

Reagan’s Acceptance Speech: July 17, 1980

As Michael Malbin has noted, “Ronald Reagan had three strategic goals for the Republican convention. . . . He wanted to maintain the enthusiasm of the conservative supporters who won him the nomina-
tion. He wanted to reach out to centrist and moderate Republicans, particularly to white-collar suburbanites who might be thinking about voting for independent candidate John Anderson. Finally, he wanted to build on his appeal to normally Democratic blue-collar workers.”12 Reagan’s acceptance speech on July 17 was the most precise expression of these aspirations to date.

The Republican presidential nominee told the various constituencies that his party would help “build a new consensus with all those across the land who share a community of values embodied” in the campaign theme of “family, work, neighborhood, peace, and freedom.” The centrist Reagan emerged: “As president, I will establish a liaison with the 50 governors to encourage them to eliminate, where it exists, discrimination against women.” Meanwhile, he reassured his base by emphasizing his belief that reductions in taxes (through his plan to cut taxes by 30 percent over a three-year period) and the size of government, accompanied by the deregulation and private development of natural resources would help the United States overcome weaknesses in its current defense, economic, and energy policies. But Reagan’s masterstroke was to present himself as a man of peace, committed to negotiations with the Soviet Union:

Of all the objectives we seek, first and foremost is the establishment of lasting world peace. We must always stand ready to negotiate in good faith, ready to pursue any reasonable avenue that holds forth the promise of lessening tensions and furthering the prospects of peace. But let our friends and those who may wish us ill take note: the United States has an obligation to its citizens and to the people of the world never to let those who would destroy freedom dictate the future course of human life on this planet. I would regard my election as proof that we have renewed our resolve to preserve world peace and freedom.

Reagan was deploying a rhetorical arsenal that he had not yet amassed during the 1968 and 1976 Republican presidential contests. Carter would attempt to portray Reagan as a dangerous warmonger in the months ahead, but Reagan continued to tell voters that they should separate his strategy of rearmament from his objective of mutual cooperation with the Soviet Union—this was the heart of his interpretation of the conservative slogan “peace through strength.”
Reagan, Race Relations, and
the South: August 3, 1980

The 1980 campaign raised the familiar issues of race, rights, and the South, but somewhat less empathically than had the 1968 race, when southerners controlled a deciding share of the delegates to the Republican Party’s convention. Nonetheless, the South could not be discounted in 1980. Dick Wirthlin had suggested that Reagan might have to write off the region, yet at the same time recommended a campaign premised on the belief that no section of the country should be conceded to Carter. Thus it was no surprise that Reagan’s first major campaign trip after the convention took him southward.

The Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, had a long tradition of hosting stump speeches, but Reagan’s appearance marked the first visit from a presidential candidate. Reagan reiterated his most familiar campaign themes: Carter’s economic policies had fueled inflation, and the United States was no longer respected by its enemies.

But the governor also made a number of rhetorical appeals to the conservative base—an essential tactic in a region where every state except Virginia had delivered its electoral votes to Carter four years earlier. In the sweltering Mississippi heat, Reagan told the crowd of listeners, “I believe in states’ rights; I believe in people doing as much as they can at the private level.” If elected president, Reagan promised, he would “restore to states and local governments the power that properly belongs to them.”

His message was enthusiastically received by his Mississippi audience, but it was not popular with all southerners. Reverend Andrew Young, former ambassador to the United Nations and a civil rights activist, wrote a Washington Post opinion essay about Reagan’s remarks in which he warned that “code words like ‘states’ rights’ and symbolic places like Philadelphia, Miss., leave me cold.” Young was of course referring to the 1964 murders of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in that Mississippi town. “Is Reagan saying that he intends to do everything he can to turn the clock back to the Mississippi justice of 1964?” he asked. “Do the powers of the state and local governments include the right to end the voting right of black citizens?”

Reagan had been vying for the black vote throughout the campaign. His appearance in Mississippi did little for this cause, however—espe-
cially given that his campaign had declined an invitation to appear at the NAACP convention.

Two days after his speech at the Neshoba County Fair, Reagan was courting black votes at the Urban League convention in New York. This time he dropped any mention of states’ rights, instead telling the audience, “I am committed to the protection and enforcement of the civil rights of black Americans. This commitment is interwoven into every phase of the programs I will propose.” As an example of his commitment, Reagan outlined a plan to develop “enterprise zones” for urban renewal.

His speech at the Neshoba Fair notwithstanding, Reagan’s campaign rhetoric that fall was not dominated by code words. Instead, he relied on appeals to his economic program and its relationship to national defense.

The Democratic Convention and Carter’s Acceptance Speech: August 11 to August 14, 1980

Carter’s renomination was essentially assured when he arrived at the Democratic National Convention in New York on August 13. This is not to say the race was unproblematic, however. The Carter-Kennedy battle had been acrimonious and hard fought, and Kennedy would make his mark on the party’s platform before the convention’s end, exhorting Democrats to institute a new jobs-creation package. But the senator would also endorse Carter and call for the Democratic Party to unify and defeat Ronald Reagan.

Carter’s acceptance speech, delivered on August 14, reflected the distinctly different directions in which the two parties were headed: “This election is a stark choice between two men, two parties, two sharply different pictures of what America is and what the world is, but it’s more than that—it’s a choice between two futures.” The president contrasted his commitment to international cooperation with his opponent’s policies, which, he argued, would lead to “the risk of international confrontation, the risk of an uncontrollable, unaffordable, and unwinnable nuclear arms race.”

The president also spoke of his administration’s “economic renewal program for the 1980’s,” declaring that it “will meet our immediate need for jobs and attack the very same, long-range problem that caused
unemployment and inflation in the first place. It’ll move America simultaneously toward our five great economic goals—lower inflation, better productivity, revitalization of American industry, energy security, and jobs.” He claimed that his return to office would produce alternative sources of domestic energy and a transportation system that would allow American coal to compete with OPEC oil. Carter vowed he would support the technology and communications industries, expand job opportunities through training programs and investment in new energy-efficient homes and vehicles, and encourage investment in regions and communities struggling with unemployment.

But these economic promises aside, Carter failed to present a powerful economic agenda. Instead, he devoted his energy to attacking Reagan’s platform, criticizing his promise to provide both guns and butter:

They call it Reagan-Kemp-Roth. I call it a free lunch that Americans cannot afford. The Republican tax program offers rebates to the rich, deprivation for the poor, and fierce inflation for all of us. . . . Along with this gigantic tax cut, the new Republican leaders promise to protect retirement and health programs and to have massive increases in defense spending—and they claim they can balance the budget. If they are serious about these promises, and they say they are, then a close analysis shows that the entire rest of the Government would have to be abolished, everything from education to farm programs, from the G.I. bill to the night watchman at the Lincoln Memorial—and their budget would still be in the red.

Carter went on to promise equal opportunity and equal rights for all, and decry the Republican Party’s record on social justice. The president also claimed his party had “reversed the Republican decline in defense.” Unlike Reagan’s speech, Carter’s did not promise a rapid return to prosperity. Instead, he highlighted one of the distinguishing themes of his campaign: the need for sacrifice. Reagan’s vision was “a make-believe world,” Carter declared, which entailed “no hard choices, no sacrifice, no tough decisions—it sounds too good to be true, and it is.” He added: “If we succumb to a dream world then we’ll wake up to a nightmare. But if we start with reality and fight to make our dreams a reality, then Americans will have a good life, a life of meaning and purpose in a nation that’s strong and secure.”

The president’s strong performance at the convention notwithstanding-
ing, Patrick Caddell remained concerned. In an August 18 memo to the
president, the pollster bluntly said: “Re-election is not something to be
gambled. Risks ought to be minimized. However, your case is quite dif-
ferent. You suffer because you are held to have no vision, no grand plan. . . . To date you have shown no inclination in this direction. You
have balked at second term agenda discussions, turning to us for cam-
paign themes instead. Frankly, you are not going to get one from your
Domestic Council or OMB. If you want to move, now is the time, while
you’re riding a comeback of sorts.”17

The fall presidential campaign was a few weeks away, and the pres-
ident had no major campaign themes in place. Caddell offered some—
Carter’s leadership ability, especially on issues on peace, human rights,
and nuclear weapons; and his basic integrity and strong values. These
were rhetorical messages, not the grand plan Caddell suggested was
missing from the campaign. Reagan’s message, however, was largely
developed and well rehearsed.

On the Presidential Campaign Trail:
August 15 to September 20, 1980

Rival Social Policies

Voters considered national defense and the economy as the main issues
on which to evaluate presidential candidates in 1980. Social policies
were also important to the electorate, of course, but none of the candi-
dates provided novel approaches to pressing social issues or presented
views that fundamentally enhanced their standing with a broad cross-
section of voters.

The 1980 Democratic platform addressed the highly charged issue of
abortion by stating, “The Democratic Party supports the 1973 Supreme
Court decision on abortion rights as the law of the land and opposes
any constitutional amendment to restrict or overturn that decision.”18
Carter was not in complete accord with this official position, as he
opposed demands for expanded federal support for abortion services.
The ACLU charged that the president had failed to implement his
pledge to find alternatives to abortion.19 Yet Carter scored high marks
on other issues related to women. He supported the Equal Rights
Amendment and had a solid record of appointing women and minori-
ties to judicial posts and executive positions within his administration.
The Democratic Party’s 1980 platform proclaimed that “of the six
women who have served in Cabinet positions, three have been Carter appointees. More women, Blacks and Hispanics have been appointed to senior government positions than during any other Administration in history.” It was a record that neither Anderson nor Reagan could challenge. The president’s performance on social issues disappointed some liberal and conservative Democrats, but it was generally well received, and Carter’s rhetorical strategy was to campaign on the record he had built while in the White House.

Carter also appeared to take advantage of the Rose Garden effect when introducing policies that favored various sectors of society he was courting. For instance, the *New York Times* reminded its readers that Carter’s September 30 announcement that he was relaxing environmental standards and raising import restrictions for the steel industry was geared toward voters in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, key states in the upcoming election.  

Reagan’s appeals on social issues were directed as much at conservative Democrats—union members and the working class, for example—as they were toward his own party. A number of Republican strategists believed, for example, that the governor’s abortion stance would persuade some conservative Democrats to vote for their candidate. “Very simply,” Reagan wrote in a letter dated October 11, 1979, “my feeling is that an abortion is the taking of a human life and that can only be justified or excused in our society as defense of the mother’s life.” Reagan’s position was reflected in the 1980 Republican platform, which he endorsed: “[W]e affirm our support of a constitutional amendment to restore protection of the right to life for unborn children. We also support the Congressional efforts to restrict the use of taxpayers’ dollars for abortion.” Reagan’s long-standing and well-known posture on this issue carried the potential to garner votes from the conservative segment of the Democratic Party. Yet the abortion issue was not a dominant theme of his campaign, and Reagan stated that, if elected president, he would not use it as a criterion in making judicial appointments.

Similarly, although Reagan did not attempt to hide or make light of his opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, he did not make it a central issue while he was on the hustings. And during the platform fight on the ERA at the Republican convention in Detroit, he drafted a carefully worded letter expressing the position he had taken throughout his presidential campaign. “I am for equal rights and have a record to substantiate that claim,” Reagan said, in reference to legislation he
had supported as governor of California. He continued: “An amend-
ment puts the matter in the hands of the courts and means years of
court cases before a body of case law is established.” During the cam-
paign, he promised that if he became president he would place a
woman on the Supreme Court.

In an August 22 speech in Dallas, Reagan campaigned for the vote of
the newly emerging religious Right. Reagan told evangelical Christians,
“I want you to know I endorse you and what you are doing. Religious
America is awakening, perhaps just in time for our country’s sake.” But
speaking in Virginia in early October, he expressed his belief in the
importance of the separation of church and state. In the full range of
policy domains—the economy, defense, social policy, and so on—Rea-
gan was seeking to command the center, albeit from a rightward tilt.
He had become adroit at broadening his appeal by strategically adapt-
ing his rhetoric for the audience he was targeting.

It could be argued that the rhetorical refinement was less apparent
in Reagan’s earlier campaigns because he had never advanced beyond
the primaries, where candidates tend to play to their natural bases. But
the heresthetical beauty of what Reagan was doing is that even when he
adapted his words, his philosophical themes remained consistent.

Anderson’s appeals on social issues were not politically distinct. The
gulf did not appear to be very wide between him and Carter on key
social issues. Anderson was a stronger pro-choice advocate than Carter
was, but both of them supported the ERA and gun control.

All three candidates were known as religious Christians and thus
they had the opportunity to be favored by faith-based communities. Of
them all, Carter was the most favored candidate among evangelical
Christians, according to a Gallup Poll report.

Rival Defense and Foreign Policies

Throughout the presidential campaign, Carter both sought to hold his
left flank and strengthen his position among moderate and conservative
Democrats. He leaned toward the latter as he made appeals on defense
and foreign policy. Speaking before the American Legion convention in
Boston on August 21, the president responded to Reagan’s attacks on
his defense policy and even adopted rhetoric that seemed to echo Rea-
gan’s “peace through strength” message. In his stump speeches and
radio commentaries, Reagan had been strongly critical of Carter’s con-
troversial decision to halt production of the B-1 bomber. The president
told the Legionnaires that instead of B-1 bombers he was developing cruise missiles because “they represent a far more effective deterrent.” Among the foreign policy goals he outlined was the prevention of war “through the assurance of our nation’s strength and our nation’s will.”

Carter asserted that the U.S. nuclear deterrent was adequate and that U.S. security could be ensured by modernizing the cruise missile, MX missile, and the Trident system; developing a rapid deployment force for various contingencies, especially in the Persian Gulf region; and negotiating nuclear arms control treaties with the Soviet Union. He vowed to oversee “a steady, predictable, well-planned, orderly increase” in defense spending. This shift toward a rearmament-oriented defense policy was due in no small measure to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the mounting list of international crises (such as the Ogaden War of 1978) that the Carter administration came to view through a superpower lens. Furthermore, Democrats in Congress, such as Senator Sam Nunn (D-GA), had been exerting pressure on the president for increased defense spending and a more robust military posture—even before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979.

The president’s shifts, then, were largely reactive. His strategic outlook remained intact, and this was evident even as specific policy decisions suggested a hardening of his position. He argued that a continuation of traditional containment, including especially nuclear arms control negotiations, would make the United States safe and war less likely. The essence of Carter’s campaign was that he was running on his record. In other words, in every policy domain, including defense, Carter was running a rhetorical campaign.

Sometimes the Carter administration presented evidence of its moves in a more hawkish direction on defense matters. Presidential Directive 59 is a prime example. Approved by President Carter on July 25, 1980, the directive mandated the development of plans for counterforce strikes in the event of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. PD-59 was classified, but the substance of the directive, which was made public, was reviewed by Secretary of Defense Harold Brown in his speech at the Naval War College on August 20. Even though PD-59 was an extension of National Security Decision Memorandum 242 (also called the Schlesinger Doctrine) of 1974, which also planned for targeting U.S. nuclear weapons at Soviet military forces, some scholars have interpreted it in electoral terms. Political scientist Daniel Wirks has described PD-59 as “President Carter’s eleventh-hour hawkish revision of Ameri-
can declaratory nuclear strategy” signed in the midst of the presidential campaign.\(^{35}\) Historian Walter LaFeber has interpreted the policy as an attempt “to outflank the Republican nominee, Ronald Reagan, from the right—a mission impossible.”\(^{36}\)

It was an impossible mission because, as Wirls has observed, it simultaneously “showed Republicans that their political message had struck a sympathetic public chord” and was more fodder for the growing peace movement, which for a couple of years had been saying that President Carter had moved to the right on defense.\(^{37}\) The hardening of the Carter administration’s posture on defense was not producing domestic political dividends.

PD-59 represented deep thinking by a range of experts. Hank Cooper, a Republican scientist who was invited to work on the directive, recalls that “because of the bipartisan and broad way the Carter administration had pursed the Nuclear Targeting Policy Review within the entire nuclear/strategic community,” Reagan’s postelection strategic modernization program, reflected in National Security Decision Directive 13, included the core elements of PD-59.\(^{38}\) President Carter’s defense policy in 1979 and 1980 was not merely a response to electoral pressure. The public revelation of defense policies like PD-59, however, had the appearance of a president on the run and a president that was moving in the policy direction of his Republican opponent.

The revelation about the Stealth bomber program had a similar fate. Reports surfaced in print media and television news that the Carter administration had instituted a program to develop stealth weapons. An administration official was quoted in the Washington Post on August 14 as saying, “[Y]ou’re going to hear about these new bomber breakthroughs sooner or later in this campaign.”\(^{39}\) On August 22, Brown confirmed the existence of the weapons program but denied that the Carter administration was trying to thwart criticism from the Republican Party and Ronald Reagan.\(^{40}\) Richard V. Allen persuaded Reagan to “deliver [an] immediate counterpunch,” which he did during a speech in Jacksonville, Florida, on September 4.\(^{41}\) Reagan deemed the revelation as an attempt to help “Mr. Carter’s troubled campaign” and charged the secretary of defense with making public “one of the nation’s most closely held military secrets in a transparent effort to divert attention from the Administration’s dismal defense record.”\(^{42}\) President Ford and other Republican leaders made similar statements.\(^{43}\) The Republican response was not unexpected, but the exchange between the two sides highlighted how, in portraying itself as tough
and resolved on national security, the Carter administration and the campaign were struggling to find a distinct policy definition on national defense, one of the most important issues for voters in 1980. The presidential election was only a few months away, and the Carter campaign had not found a unique appeal on national security.

While Carter labored to appear strong on defense, Reagan presented a more muted version of his own foreign policy and defense plans. Speaking at a Veterans of Foreign Wars gathering in Chicago on August 18, he expressed in peaceful terms his call for a military buildup: “Actually, I’ve called for whatever it takes to be so strong that no other nation will dare violate the peace. . . . World peace must be our number one priority. It is the first task of statecraft to preserve peace so that brave men need not die in battle. But it must not be peace at any price; it must not be a peace of humiliation and gradual surrender.”

Reagan rejected the notion that this could not come about without domestic sacrifices when he invoked his heretical argument that there was no gun-versus-butter trade-off: “Our government must stop pretending that it has a choice between promoting the general welfare and providing for the common defense. Today they are one and the same.”

Reagan also returned to his theme about negotiating nuclear weapons agreements: “I think continued negotiation with the Soviet Union is essential. We need never be afraid to negotiate as long as we keep our long term objectives (the pursuit of peace for one) clearly in mind and don’t seek agreements just for the sake of having an agreement. . . . I have repeatedly stated that I would be willing to negotiate an honest, verifiable reduction in nuclear weapons by both our countries to the point that neither of us represented a threat to the other. I cannot, however, agree to a treaty—specifically, the SALT II treaty, which, in effect, legitimizes a nuclear arms buildup.”

Reagan also presented a more moderate line on other foreign policy issues, including the status of Taiwan. Reporting on Reagan’s Taiwan statements, China’s People’s Daily newspaper accused the governor of “interfering in China’s internal affairs.” The Reagan campaign responded quickly and forcefully. On August 22, George H. W. Bush, visiting China on behalf of the Reagan campaign, stated that “Gover-
nor Reagan, if elected, would not set back the clock . . . [on the] two-China policy.” Soon thereafter, Reagan gave his assurance that, as president, he would abide by the Taiwan Relations Act.48

Anderson presented a moderate platform on defense policy. He supported the SALT II treaty, opposed the MX missile and the idea of striving for military superiority over the Soviets, and wanted drastic cuts in defense spending. Anderson tried to separate himself from the two main contenders by charging that they were both oriented toward fighting, at the very least, a limited nuclear war, but he was closer to the president on defense issues, including his support for SALT II. Anderson’s positions on defense matters reinforced his standing with his natural political base but did not help him expand his reach.49

Rival Economic Plans

On August 28, President Carter gave a speech on his “economic renewal program.” The program included about $27.6 billion in personal and business tax cuts, an increase in government assistance for energy conservation, renewed government support for revitalized industry, an extension of unemployment compensation, and the creation of an Economic Revitalization Board composed of leaders from industry, labor, and the public sector.50

The White House announced that it had sought the advice of a variety of leaders and opinion makers before unveiling the plan. And, indeed, Carter’s proposal was favorably received by a range of prominent figures including Senator Kennedy, House Speaker Tip O’Neill, U.S. Steel chairman David M. Roderick, and the Conference of Mayors. But beneath the accolades few saw the proposal as a major leap forward. The response from Armco chairman C. William Verity, Jr., was typical: “My first reaction is that this is a disappointingly small step toward a very large problem. . . . I am a great deal more encouraged by the actions being considered by Congress, which respond directly to the need to rebuild the American economy.” William M. Agee, the chairman of Bendix Corporation, offered a similar assessment: “It’s a remarkable policy for its inconsistency with policies he has advocated in the past. The President is not creating an environment where psychological inflationary pressures will abate. I see him as part of the problem.”51

Carter’s August 28 announcement constituted the third economic package he had presented in eight months.52 Policy analysts surmised
that the president was searching for a platform that would “solve his own political problems, as well as . . . cure the nation’s economic ills.”\textsuperscript{53} It was a tall order, and one that Carter’s latest proposal was unable to fill.

Reagan had been advocating tax cuts, a reduction in government spending, and a host of familiar themes throughout the campaign, but until he rolled out his economic plan in Chicago on September 9, he had not integrated these ideas into a unified package. Speaking to the International Business Council, Reagan promised to reduce government regulations and spending; cut personal income tax rates at 10 percent a year across the board for three years; and institute a stable national monetary policy, thereby restoring international confidence in the American economy. The alternative policy vision Reagan was presenting was especially evident in his confidence that this economic plan could be used to facilitate a strategic military buildup.\textsuperscript{54}

The International Business Council address was the public culmination of Reagan’s many years of testing and refining his economic ideas through radio addresses, speeches, and newspaper columns. Behind the scenes, Martin Anderson had succinctly captured Reagan’s thinking on the subject in his August 1979 policy memo. And Richard Wirthlin’s June 1980 campaign plan had suggested that Reagan prepare a comprehensive economic message that could be endorsed by leading economists and delivered well before the fall.\textsuperscript{55} Still, Reagan’s strategists viewed developing a comprehensive economic agenda to be their most difficult election-year assignment.\textsuperscript{56} Reagan’s heresthetic message about economic prosperity and national security had been years in the making.

Forewarned that Reagan would be unveiling his economic program in Chicago, Carter delivered a counterattack that same day, telling New Jersey newspaper editors that “there is no way that you can have a Reagan-Kemp-Roth proposal intact, make an attempt to balance the budget, keep a strong defense, to which Reagan professes to be committed, and continue the routine programs that are designed to help the American people have a better life. It’s just a ridiculous proposal, and any economist who studies it knows that.” Reporters covering Carter’s speech were given an analysis of Reagan’s plan that had been prepared by the Office of Management and Budget. According to that assessment, Reagan’s plan would increase inflation or decrease spending on government programs.\textsuperscript{57}

Some Republican moderates, such as President Gerald Ford, also
opposed Reagan’s three-year tax cut. Ford doubted that it was possible to predict the economic situation three years down the road. Despite the criticism, Reagan’s message was widely deemed to be moderate. Writing for the *Washington Post*, reporter (and later, Reagan biographer) Lou Cannon noted that “Reagan’s plan as outlined today is far more modest than his campaign rhetoric over the last several months implied. It was in part an effort to assure voters that he could cut taxes, balance the budget and boost defense spending as promised without unduly slashing government programs.”

Reagan’s message seemed to resonate with voters. In September, the same month in which Reagan gave his economic address, a Harris Poll reported that 45 percent of respondents 18 or older felt that Reagan would do a better job handling the economy than Anderson or Carter would. Only 27 percent endorsed Carter, and approximately 15 percent favored Anderson.

But despite strenuous campaigning around the country and carefully crafted messages that moderated his positions, Reagan was unable to maintain the immediate postconvention bounce of 45 percent support that he’d experienced in the Gallup Poll’s presidential trial heat. Twenty-nine percent of those questioned in that early-August survey had indicated they would vote for Carter and 14 percent for Anderson if the election were held at that time. Yet, by mid-September, Carter and Reagan were tied with 39 percent each, while Anderson maintained his 14 percent support.

It is not unusual for candidates to use their policies to bring together diverse voters who might otherwise not form a single coalition. What differentiates that behavior from a heresthetical strategy is their reliance on out-of-the-box policies and ideas. Reagan’s economic program was radical as a campaign idea; no other presidential candidate in 1980 campaigned on a proposal of massive tax cuts, and most considered his plan a fantasy. Yet, as the economist Michael Boskin has observed, Reagan’s proposal reflected a growing consensus among economists. The California governor had latched onto a trend that the other candidates had ignored, disbelieved, or dismissed as too radical. A heresthetician typically sees possibilities beyond the confines of conventional wisdom, identifying emerging intellectual and policy opportunities that circumvent traditional assumptions and appeal to a broad swath of the electorate.

The radical nature of a heresthetical strategy might bind its proponent to a specific set of policy positions if he or she is elected. Thus, the
heresthetician might find it difficult to abandon campaign proposals once in office. To do so would likely bring about the collapse of the very coalition the candidate worked so hard to construct, inasmuch as that coalition was the product of those very promises.61

On August 14 Anderson announced Mary Crisp, former cochairperson of the Republican Party, as the head of his campaign, and 11 days later he announced that Patrick Lucey, former Democratic governor of Wisconsin, would be his running mate. With Anderson’s team in place and Carter and Reagan having won their party’s nominations, the three-way race was officially under way.

On August 30, 1980, Anderson unveiled his National Unity Platform, which included his economic program.62 Although Anderson had already put forward many of the individual elements of this program, they were now joined into a comprehensive economic statement that Anderson and his running mate would use to frame their fall campaign. The platform called for withholding personal tax cuts until the federal budget was balanced; imposing a $0.50 per gallon gasoline tax, the revenues of which would be used to decrease payroll taxes while increasing Social Security benefits; cutting Social Security taxes in half; exempting the first $750 in interest income from taxes; eliminating inheritance and gift taxes for spouses; creating tax incentives for the auto and steel industries, as well as small businesses; reducing taxes paid by families caring for elderly relatives in the home; and revoking tax credits traditionally offered against private primary and secondary school tuition.

But Anderson’s program reached beyond taxes. He called for limits on federal spending as a percentage of the GNP. He endorsed the 1980 Youth Employment Act, which would provide $2 billion a year for job training as a means of decreasing unemployment. His ideas on voluntary wage-price guidelines enjoyed the support of labor and industry, when coupled with tax incentives for compliance with stated guidelines. And, finally, Anderson’s “Urban Reinvestment” program called for the creation of a federal urban renewal fund, supported by nearly $4 billion a year in federal alcohol and tobacco taxes.63

Anderson, like Carter, warned the American people that they would have to sacrifice and change their energy-consumption patterns. The tax on gasoline was a prime example of this approach. Unlike Reagan, Anderson had little faith that tax cuts for individuals would stimulate the economy. Anderson and Carter were by no means in lockstep on the economy, but both candidates’ rhetoric and proposals suggested
that a shrinking pie would require that Americans make do with less. Only Reagan’s plan promised economic recovery through tax cuts, and general prosperity without a substantial reduction in energy consumption, assuring voters that a revived American economy could lead to boundless opportunity for all.

The Fall Campaign Officially Begins: September 1, 1980

The three contenders each launched his campaign in regions where his strategists believed a strong showing was needed to win the election. Wirthlin had already calculated that Reagan’s greatest challenge lay in the medium-sized states, particularly New Jersey. Reagan would need at least 82 electoral votes from these states to win. He opened his campaign on Labor Day in New Jersey.

Reagan’s speech in Jersey City was an exercise in rhetorical flourish, but his focus on the president’s economic performance also carried a heresitical subtext. In reviewing Carter’s record, Reagan signaled to voters of all political stripes that a vote for the incumbent was a vote for continued economic failure:

Eight million out of work. Inflation running at 18 percent in the first quarter of 1980. Black unemployment at about 14 percent, higher than any single year since the government began keeping separate statistics. Four straight major deficits run up by Carter and his friends in Congress. The highest interest rates since the Civil War. . . . A recession is when your neighbor loses his job. A depression is when you lose yours. Recovery is when Jimmy Carter loses his.

The gloves were off. The bare knuckles did more damage later that same day, during a stop at the Michigan State Fair, where Reagan courted Michigan’s substantial working-class vote—a category of voters essential to a Reagan victory. The governor told the crowd, “I’m happy to be here where you’re dealing at first hand with the economic policies that have been committed and he’s opening his campaign down in the city that gave birth to and is the parent body of the Ku Klux Klan.”

Reagan’s attack misfired. Carter was simultaneously launching his
campaign in Tuscumbia, Alabama. (As pollster Pat Caddell had noted, Carter needed to secure his southern base.) Carter’s opening remarks that day were an appeal to his fellow southerners: “I remembered that in all our nation’s wars young men from the South have led the rolls of volunteers and also led the rolls of casualties. We southerners believe in the nobility of courage on the battlefield. And because we understand the costs of war, we also believe in the nobility of peace.” When members of the Klan, which had already endorsed Reagan, interrupted the speech, Carter responded by reminding the audience that he was the first candidate from the Deep South to become president in 140 years, adding, “I say these people in white sheets do not understand our region and what it’s been through. . . . They do not understand that the South and all of America must move forward.”

Carter had taken a one-two punch from Reagan and the Klan and emerged unscathed. Reagan’s remarks had made his Detroit audience uncomfortable. Worse yet, the governor had got his facts wrong: Tuscumbia was the national headquarters of the Klan, not its birthplace. Seven Democratic governors from the South issued a statement denouncing “Mr. Reagan’s callous and opportunistic slap at the South.” Carter chimed in during a September 2 appearance in Independence, Missouri, saying that he “resent[ed] very deeply what Ronald Reagan said about the South.” The Reagan-Bush campaign issued what was, in effect, an apology for the blunder.

Reagan would ultimately prevail in the South, but not because of his negative campaign rhetoric linking Carter to the Klan. After the debacle in Michigan, Reagan returned to his bedrock themes of defense and economic reform. Despite the Detroit blunder, his continued emphasis on these key issues eventually won southern Democrats over to his coalition.

Meanwhile, Anderson had launched his fall campaign in Illinois, consistent with the “Midwest strategy” that his advisers had suggested to him in 1979. And he proved no more immune to the temptations of negative campaigning than his competitors had, declaring that “Mr. Reagan isn’t even a man for the 1950s. He is really a man of the 1920s.” Of Carter, Anderson quipped, “He planned a recession, and by golly, it worked.”

The candidates offered little new information about themselves in their opening speeches. In the ensuing weeks, however, heresthetic would begin to win out over rhetoric, as the campaign played out the repeated drama of Reagan proposing his plans for the economy and
defense and foreign policy, and Anderson and Carter denouncing them. The Californian was defining the terms of the campaign, something that Caddell had urged the president to do. Anderson and Carter found themselves devoting at least as much time to rhetorical attacks on Reagan’s plan as they did to presenting their own ideas.

The president’s predicament was reflected in a campaign document titled “Groping for a Central Message or Theme for the Autumn.” The document decried the lack of a message: “For the Carter candidacy, the view ahead must be credible—cannot simply be a rhetorical vision. . . . Put another way, the view ahead must be stated in the context of this Presidency less as a driving dream than a few basic (almost but not quite programmatic) goals which are reiterated again and again.”\(^{68}\) As late as the fall of 1980, the Carter campaign remained in search of a direction.

Anderson versus Reagan: 
The Debate, September 21, 1980

The League of Women Voters invited all three candidates to participate in a nationally televised debate in Baltimore in September. Desperate to maintain their incumbent advantage, the Carter campaign team advised the president to decline. Caddell was wary of a three-way race, and his comments on the subject were indicative of sentiments in the Carter camp as a whole: “In a general election sense Anderson is assaulting much of Carter’s natural liberal base whose normal certainty would allow Carter to move right toward Reagan.” Nor was this fact lost on the Reagan campaign. Wirthlin had long ago concluded that Anderson was likely to attract more Carter supporters than Reagan voters.\(^{69}\) Thus, when the Carter campaign refused to participate in the three-way debate (at least until after a Carter-Reagan debate), Reagan’s side insisted that the third-party candidate be included. Anderson himself very much wanted to participate, and the League ultimately found that he met their tripartite criteria of voter support, constitutional eligibility, and actual possibility of winning.\(^{70}\)

Carter, fearing the damage that a decent Anderson showing could do to his base, formally declined the League’s invitation. Carter also feared the effect of a strong Reagan performance on his tenuous standing in the polls. From Reagan’s perspective, the debate offered a valuable opportunity to score points with voters; but an exceptional Ander-
son performance could just as easily eat into his shrinking lead. Anderson himself could hardly pass up an invitation to engage the GOP nominee in a nationally televised debate.

The independent and Republican candidates faced each other in Baltimore on September 21. The *Washington Post* headline the next day was “Debate Shows Rivals’ Wide Differences.” And indeed the exchange between the two men reinforced, rather than weakened, the existing allegiances of the voters.

Early in the debate, Anderson called Reagan’s proposal to curb inflation through tax cuts “irresponsible.” Reagan responded by stating that the true sources of inflation were excessive federal spending and reduced productivity due to excessive government regulation. He then launched his heretical message that tax cuts could be used to reduce the federal deficit:

I believe we need incentive for the individual, and for business and industry, and I believe the plan that I have submitted, with detailed backing, and which has been approved by a number of our leading economists in the country, is based on projections, conservative projections out for the next five years, that indicates [sic] that this plan would, by 1983, result in a balanced budget.

When asked how Americans should respond to the energy crisis, Reagan described conservation as just one component of a larger solution. He advocated increased exploration for domestic coal and petroleum, as well as increased reliance on nuclear power. Anderson, on the other hand, asked Americans to change their lifestyle: “We will have to reduce the use of the private automobile. We are going to have to resort to van pooling, to car pooling. We are going to have to create a new conservation ethic in the minds of the American people.” Reagan disagreed: “As for saving energy and conserving, the American people haven’t been doing badly at that.”

Anderson attacked the governor’s economic plan, claiming that it was incapable of balancing the budget. This was Reagan’s greatest vulnerability: Reagan’s assurance that his economic plan would not fuel inflation or lead to further deficits was the glue holding together his coalition of social and economic conservatives. Reagan defended himself by reminding listeners that his Chicago speech was based on five-year projections made by the Senate Budget Committee.

Anderson dismissed this claim. The “Senate Budget Com
Report does not accommodate all of the Reagan defense plans,” he warned the audience, saying, “It doesn’t accommodate the expenditures that he calls for. . . . I think the figures that he has given are simply not going to stand up.” Reagan quickly moved in to defend his budget proposal: “We did factor in our own ideas with regard to increases in the projected military spending that we believe would, over a period of time, do what is necessary.”

The two contenders struggled through their agreement on some issues, including opposition to reinstating the draft, but found their footing again in their profound differences on abortion, with Anderson openly opposing Reagan’s call for a constitutional amendment banning the use of federal funding for abortion.

In his closing remarks, Reagan the optimist promised a better tomorrow:

Today, we’re confronted with the horrendous problems that we’ve discussed here tonight. And some people in high positions of leadership tell us that the answer is to retreat. That the best is over. That we must cut back. That we must share in an ever-increasing scarcity. . . . For 200 years, we’ve lived in the future, believing that tomorrow would be better than today, and today would be better than yesterday. I still believe that.

Anderson, who had the final word, again sounded like Carter: “A generation of office seekers has tried to tell the American people that they could get something for nothing. It’s been a time, therefore, of illusion and false hopes, and the longer it continues, the more dangerous it becomes. We’ve got to stop drifting.”

Anderson’s pragmatic rhetoric was obscured by Reagan’s sunny optimism. In addition, the independent candidate did not offer a new or novel way of thinking about policy problems. Mark Bisnow, Anderson’s press secretary from 1978 to 1980, has suggested in hindsight,

It was not surprising that in the aftermath of the debate surveys indicated that liberals thought Anderson had won, and conservatives thought Reagan had won. In a sense, this amounted to a loss for Anderson, since his lower standing in the polls required him to broaden his base and attract whole new groups of voters. Overall, Anderson’s performance was creditable, but ultimately disappointing. He had not shone as much as many had expected
he would in a match-up with Reagan. He did not jolt many into thinking differently about his candidacy.

Reagan, on the other hand, hit his upbeat rhetorical stride, expounding a heresthetical vision in which his defense policy and his tax-reduction plan did not have to be inflationary or deficit producing.

On the Campaign Trail: September 22 to October 27, 1980

In mid-September, New York’s Liberal Party endorsed Anderson, thereby breaking with its tradition of supporting the Democratic nominee. The *New Republic* endorsed Anderson in its October 4 issue, although the endorsement was less than glowing: “[T]o vote for [Carter] a second time is an act of political decadence. . . . John Anderson’s main asset is that he is not Jimmy Carter.” Despite picking up a few such endorsements and his continued accusations that Carter had betrayed his liberal base on issues such as energy and resource conservation and Reagan’s unworkable economic plan, Anderson was unable to maintain his 14 percent voter support. That said, the voters who stayed with him were still primarily liberal and moderate Democrats and independents—the very groups that were essential to Carter’s return to power. Although his hopes of reaching the White House were fading, Anderson was nonetheless a real force in the election.

Carter’s most formidable challenge, of course, came from Reagan. While Anderson was attacking Carter, the president was moving to co-opt Reagan’s positions while simultaneously throwing rhetorical punches at his GOP opponent. On September 30, he announced an assistance package for the steel industry that raised import restrictions and relaxed environmental rules. Reagan was quoted in the *New York Times* as having “an uneasy feeling that he [Carter] might not have done anything if I hadn’t opened my mouth [by recommending a similar policy] on September 16.” The *Times* went on to remind its readers that the steel industry was based in the key electoral states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

Carter invoked a classic negative campaign against Reagan. On October 6, the president told voters that Reagan’s military policies were “an excellent way to lead our country toward war,” and that under a Reagan presidency, “Americans might be separate, black from white,
Jew from Gentile, North from South, rural from urban.” The next day, Reagan’s running mate George H.W. Bush labeled the president’s remarks “Carterism,” which he defined as “rhetoric aimed for narrow political gain and inciting hatred and division among Americans.” Carter quickly backed off, calling his earlier remarks “probably ill-advised.”

But just a few days later, Carter was back swinging. On October 10, he warned that Reagan’s opposition to the SALT II treaty and his positions on economic and social policy meant the Californian “would not be a good President or a good man to trust with the affairs of this nation in the future.”

This negative style had become characteristic of Carter’s campaign. As the incumbent, Carter believed his White House experience was his greatest asset, compared to Reagan’s dangerous inexperience. This belief left him with little room to advocate any movement away from his existing policies.

This lack of a compelling policy agenda was apparent in mid-October when the president sought to counter the bad news about the Consumer Price Index by saying Reagan’s tax cut would be bad for the economy. Secretary of State Muskie inadvertently highlighted Carter’s indecision by emphasizing the White House’s commitment to Senate ratification of SALT II, despite the fact that Carter had actually withdrawn the treaty from deliberation earlier that year in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Reagan came back with the occasional rhetorical counterpunch, but for the most part his campaign focused on broadening his own appeal. These efforts were not always successful. Although Carter had long sought to paint a Reagan presidency as inimical to the interests of blacks and minorities, it was Coretta Scott King, widow of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who leveled the most damning criticism about the likely effects of a Reagan administration. In late September, Mrs. King supposed that “if Mr. Reagan becomes President, the Klan will be quite comfortable.” A few days before the election, she repeated her warning: “I am scared that if Ronald Reagan gets into office, we are going to see more of the Ku Klux Klan and a resurgence of the Nazi Party.” Reagan found it harder to defend himself against Mrs. King’s accusations than against those of his political opponents. He was not making much headway with black voters.

Although he failed to make much headway with black civil rights leaders, Reagan continued to present a moderate domestic program. In
October he declared that he would not make the issue of abortion a litmus test for judicial appointments. He released a campaign circular stating that he would not abolish the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and would not advocate a federal law on the right-to-work issue, but that he would apply antitrust laws to unions. The Times, among others, interpreted these positions as “part of a broader strategy to move his Republican candidacy closer to the center of the political spectrum.”

Speaking to a crowd in Cincinnati on October 20, Reagan unleashed one of his most thorough attempts to portray himself as a man of peace and Carter as a hapless warmonger:

The President of the United States seems determined to have me start a nuclear war. Well, I’m just as determined not to. As a matter of fact, his foreign policy, his vacillation, his weakness is allowing our allies throughout the world to no longer trust us and depend on us and our adversaries to no longer respect us. There’s a far greater danger of an unwanted, inadvertent war with that policy than there is with someone in there who believes that the first thing we should do is rebuild our defensive capability.

The next day, Reagan publicly blamed Carter’s Iran policy for the ongoing hostage crisis. Carter charged that Reagan was using the crisis as a political football, but Reagan refused to recant.

Reagan also never lost sight of his heresthetical maneuvers during this phase of the campaign. On October 24, four days before the debate, Reagan gave a 30-minute televised address on his economic program. He reviewed his heresthetical promise of economic and social benefits for all, to which he added a new rhetorical gloss, vowing that his presidential administration would promote “a humane economy.”

While Reagan was continually selling this ambitious economic agenda, Carter was, as previously noted, talking about how ridiculous the plan was.

A mid-October Gallup Poll showed 44 percent of respondents choosing Reagan-Bush, 41 percent Carter-Mondale, and 9 percent Anderson-Lucey. Reagan had once again surpassed the president in the polls, while Anderson’s share continued to shrink. The League of Women Voters decided not to invite Anderson to participate in its next debate.
Reagan’s message was clearly reaching a broader constituency: in October he was endorsed by the International Brotherhood of Teamsters and prominent Democrats Eugene McCarthy and Eugene Rostow. Yet in the same period another Gallup Poll showed Reagan losing support, suggesting that the swings in voter support were within the margin of statistical error. Conducted in late October, just a few days before the Carter-Reagan debate, the poll found 39 percent of the voters choosing Reagan-Bush, 45 percent choosing Carter-Mondale, and 9 percent again choosing Anderson-Lucey. At this late point in the election season, neither candidate enjoyed a secure lead, a fact that heightened public anticipation of the debate.


Jimmy Carter had so far escaped meeting John Anderson and Ronald Reagan on a national platform, suggesting on several occasions that the debate would amount to a conversation between two Republicans. A second debate had originally been proposed for early October, but was postponed after the candidates could not agree on the terms. By late October, however, the political dynamics had changed. Anderson’s support had fallen below the 10 percent level required by the sponsoring League of Women Voters. With Reagan’s postconvention lead narrowing, his camp felt that their candidate needed to debate the president, and agreed to do so even without Anderson’s participation. In the Carter camp, pressure was mounting for the incumbent to interact directly with the Republican challenger. He acquiesced, and the first and only debate between the two men was scheduled to take place in Cleveland, Ohio, on October 28.

Moderator Howard K. Smith opened the debate with a question about how the candidates differed in their views on the use of American power. Reagan immediately portrayed himself as a peace advocate: “Our first priority must be world peace . . . use of force is always and only a last resort, when everything else has failed, and then only with regard to our national security.” Carter replied by portraying himself as strong on defense. He pointed to steady increases in defense spending during his first administration, and his amplification of the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf.

Seeking to preempt Carter’s charge of warmongering—an accusa-
tion the president had made throughout the fall—Reagan countered by carefully emphasizing his defense plan’s reliance on deterrence rather than aggression.

Carter countered with strong negative rhetoric. He attacked Reagan’s economic proposals and praised the American people’s willingness to sacrifice in the name of his own policies: “We have demanded that the American people sacrifice, and they have done very well.” He echoed this sentiment just a few sentences later, attributing the promise of his new energy policy to two factors: “One is conservation, which requires sacrifice, and the other one, increase in production of American energy.”

Reagan used his rebuttal to contrast Carter’s call for sacrifice with his own, more optimistic approach. The president, Reagan declared, “has . . . accused the people of living too well and that we must share in scarcity, we must sacrifice and get used to doing with less. We don’t have inflation because the people are living too well. We have inflation because the government is living too well.”

Carter reminded the audience that even Reagan’s running mate had once called his economic plan “voodoo economics.” Later he called Reagan-Kemp-Roth “one of the most highly inflationary ideas that ever has been presented to the American public.” This remark reflected Carter’s approach throughout the debate; he attacked Reagan’s proposals but failed to offer a coherent alternative. His strategy was almost entirely based on negative campaigning.

Reagan, meanwhile, relentlessly worked to broaden his appeal. He advocated the creation of urban development zones through tax incentives and private-sector support. He talked about ensuring “total equal opportunity for all people,” and evinced optimism about America’s future as a “multi-racial society.” “I believe in it,” Reagan said. “I am eternally optimistic, and I happen to believe that we’ve made great progress.”

Asked about his solution for ending the Iran hostage crisis, Reagan advocated “quiet diplomacy” and a congressional investigation once the immediate situation was resolved. He claimed that a policy of more actively supporting the shah and encouraging him to improve human rights might have been more effective in averting the crisis than the course Carter had followed.

Reagan did not offer detailed responses, however, to Carter’s remarks on terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. The president spoke at length about these matters:
Ultimately, the most serious terrorist threat is if one of those radical nations, who believe in terrorism as a policy, should have atomic weapons. Both I and all my predecessors have had a deep commitment to controlling the proliferation of nuclear weapons. In countries like Libya or Iraq, we have even alienated some of our closest trade partners because we have insisted upon the control of the spread of nuclear weapons to those potentially terrorist countries.

At one point, Carter declared that the most important difference in the campaign was the candidates’ opposing stands on nuclear nonproliferation. This was a thinly veiled reference to a statement Reagan had made early in the year, “I just don’t think it’s [the spread of nuclear weapons] any of our business.” Reagan had promptly retracted that statement and endorsed nonproliferation, but Carter chose not to pass up an opportunity for negative campaigning.

Carter’s own antiterrorism strategy included preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, imposing sanctions against countries involved with terrorist activities, and disallowing all commercial air travel to nations involved in terrorism or hijacking, or the harboring of hijackers. Reagan agreed with these proposals, but objected to the inaccurate portrayal of his views on nuclear nonproliferation, an issue that, he stated, “would be a major part of a foreign policy of mine.”

As he had done throughout the campaign, Reagan based his opposition to SALT II on the grounds that it had required the United States to make too many concessions. Carter’s rebuttal was more pointed than the vague lecturing that had characterized his past comments on this subject: “The control of these weapons is the single major responsibility of a President, and to cast out this commitment of all Presidents, because of some slight technicalities that can be corrected, is a very dangerous approach.”

Carter proposed resolving the energy crisis through conservation and increased domestic oil production, whereas Reagan blamed the crisis on government restrictions on exploration. The debate then moved on to Social Security. Reagan, wary of weakening his support among those in the center, mildly proposed the formation of a task force to consider possible reforms. In fact, he returned to this moderate tone throughout much of the evening’s exchange. When asked by moderator Smith about his opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, Reagan warned against any move that would “take this problem out of the
hands of elected legislators and put it in the hands of unelected judges,”
but also proclaimed his commitment to equal rights. He made a simi-
larly moderate appeal to union members: “I’m the only fellow who ever
ran for this job who was six times president of his own union and still
has a lifetime membership in that union.”

The candidates’ closing remarks were studies in contrast. Carter
reminded the audience that he and Reagan differed sharply on major
policy issues, but the main part of his closing remarks took a different
rhetorical tack. Carter asked the voters to stick with him because of his
experience: “I’ve had to make thousands of decisions, and each one of
those decisions has been a learning process. . . . I’ve learned in this last
three and a half years that when an issue is extremely difficult, when the
call is very close, the chances are the experts will be divided almost
50–50. And the final judgment about the future of the nation—war, peace,
involvement, reticence, thoughtfulness, care, consideration, con-
cern—has to be made by the man in the Oval Office.” He also pro-
claimed his political centrism: “I consider myself in the mainstream of
my party. I consider myself in the mainstream even of the bipartisan list
of Presidents who served before me.”

Reagan’s now-famous closing remarks embodied the heresthetical
use of rhetoric to reinforce a candidate’s overall message. Reagan’s crit-
icism that Carter could deliver neither guns nor butter slyly implied that
he could offer Americans both:

Next Tuesday all of you will go to the polls, will stand there in the
calling place and make a decision. I think when you make the
decision, it might be well if you would ask yourself, are you bet-
ter off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and
buy things in the stores than it was four years ago? Is there more
or less unemployment in the country than there was four years
ago? Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do
you feel that our security is as safe, that we’re as strong as we
were four years ago? And if you answer all of those questions yes,
why then, I think your choice is very obvious as to whom you will
vote for. If you don’t agree, if you don’t think that this course that
we’ve been on for the last four years is what you would like to see
us follow for the next four, then I could suggest another choice
that you have. This country doesn’t have to be in the shape that it
is in. We do not have to go on sharing in scarcity with the coun-
try getting worse off, with unemployment growing. . . . I would like to have a crusade today, and I would like to lead that crusade with your help. And it would be one to take Government off the backs of the great people in this country, and turn you loose again to do those things that I know you can do so well, because you did them and made this country great. Thank you.

As Hedrick Smith wrote for the *New York Times*, “The presidential debate produced no knockout blow, no disastrous gaffe and no immediate, undisputed victor.” An ABC-TV phone survey had declared Reagan the winner, but there was no unanimous verdict among the media. Reagan had, however, gotten in a subtly powerful heresthetical jab in his closing remarks. One analyst described the governor’s remark this way: “‘Are you better off now than you were four years ago?’ With that pointed question, Ronald Reagan defined the 1980 presidential election as a referendum on Jimmy Carter’s economic policies.”

Hamilton Jordan, Carter’s chief of staff, recalls his reaction to Reagan’s closing remarks thusly: “What a narrow and selfish premise, I thought, asking people to choose their President based solely on their present condition. Nevertheless, it was our idea, and now Reagan had turned it against us.”

Although John Anderson had been excluded from the October 28 forum because of his low numbers, the nascent Cable News Network had agreed to cover a simultaneous Anderson event at Constitution Hall in Washington. Anderson used the CNN coverage to respond to Carter’s and Reagan’s statements as their debate was taking place. On the topic of American military power, Anderson expressed a belief “that there really is no substantial difference between them on the issue of whether or not you can fight a limited nuclear war. . . . I do not believe that we can fight and win a nuclear war. I think there is no such thing as a limited nuclear war.” He charged that the United States had descended into “deep trouble” during the Carter years, and declared that the essence of Reagan’s policy prescriptions was “We’ll turn back the clock.”

Anderson’s commentary on the Carter-Reagan debate continued the negative rhetoric he had employed throughout his campaign. He used the CNN airtime to curry favor among his existing supporters, but offered no policy positions or arguments that were likely to broaden his appeal.
The Final Stretch: October 29 to November 4, 1980

The candidates reiterated familiar themes and appeals throughout the final week of the campaign. Both Anderson and Carter continued to go negative. On October 31, Anderson charged that a radio ad by the Carter campaign accusing him of failing to support civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s was “an effort desperately to hang onto the black vote.”

Carter’s own negative rhetoric, meanwhile, was primarily directed against Reagan. On October 29, Carter reminded his audience of Reagan’s statement in January in reference to Pakistan that the United States should not block the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Two days later, the president reached back into Reagan’s political past and charged that his opponent had equated Medicare with socialism in 1961. “The President’s constant quoting of old statements by his opponent . . . gave his campaign a dated quality,” the Times wrote, reflecting the postelection analysis among Carter’s advisers.

The president saw a glimmer of hope when Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher notified him on November 2 that the Iranian parliament had outlined terms for releasing the American hostages in Tehran. That evening, Carter made a brief public statement about these “positive” developments, and assured voters that his response would not be “affected by the [electoral] calendar.” As he had done in the past, Anderson once again called for Carter to make the terms for releasing the hostages public. Reagan, who had been highly critical of Carter’s Iran strategy, declined to comment on the grounds that the matter was “too sensitive.” The president, for his part, employed the Rose Garden strategy, emphasizing the importance of his White House experience during a crucial time in the nation’s history. Reagan kept up his heresthetical appeals in the final days of campaigning, but he, too, had occasional recourse to negative rhetoric. Speaking on October 30 to residents of an Arkansas community that had experienced an influx of Cuban émigrés, Reagan contended that Carter’s policies exacerbated the refugee problem. In a New Jersey stop later that same day, he promised his audience that he was “committed to an economic program to reduce inflation and put people back to work,” and that he would not “tax Social Security benefits.”

One day before voters headed to the polls, Reagan gave a televised address in which he reiterated various comments he had made during his debate with Carter. In declaring that the president’s policies had
produced “worsening economic conditions,” Reagan once again combined rhetoric with heresitical maneuvering.\(^\text{101}\)

In repeating these questions, Reagan once again held out a promise of prosperity and happiness that Carter simply could not match. The president would have to admit to a host of failures in order to respond credibly. As the president’s strategists later acknowledged, “Carter never went far enough in conceding that his first term had been less than successful—and in specifying just how his second term would be better . . . [he] never found a way to summarize his views in a single rousing, catchy, unifying theme.”\(^\text{102}\)

Caddell reported that, in the final days of the campaign, his polls showed voters to be increasingly dismayed by the hostage situation. Recent, heightened news attention was not helping matters, especially once the anticipated release of the hostages failed to materialize.

Lacking a message around which voters could rally, Carter needed a boost. In a September Harris Poll survey of voters, 73 percent responded affirmatively to a statement that the president was well-intentioned but his competence was questionable at times. An October survey of eligible voters by the same organization showed Carter with just over 34 percent of the vote to Reagan’s 39 percent (and Anderson’s 13 percent). A November Harris Poll reported that fewer than 4 percent of people 18 years of age and older believed the president had done a good job in the past four years. His performance was judged to be “pretty good” by 24 percent, “only fair” by 41 percent, and “poor” by approximately 30 percent of those surveyed. The Gallup Poll for October 30–November 1 showed support for Reagan-Bush climbing to 47 percent, while Carter-Mondale moved to 44 percent.\(^\text{103}\)

On the eve of the election, Caddell informed the president and his closest advisers that Reagan was going to win by eight to 10 percentage points. He told the president, “We’re losing the undecided voters overwhelmingly, and a lot of working Democrats are going to wake up tomorrow and for the first time in their lives vote Republican.”\(^\text{104}\) Caddell was right on target. On November 4, Reagan vanquished the president in a 10-point landslide, the third-largest margin in American presidential elections of the twentieth century.\(^\text{105}\) Reagan won nearly 51 percent of the popular vote (44 million), 44 states, and 489 electoral votes. Carter received 41 percent of the popular vote (35.5 million), 49 electoral votes, and only seven electoral units (Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, West Virginia, Rhode Island, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia), making him the first elected incumbent to lose the White
House since Herbert Hoover in 1932. Anderson, who failed to win a plurality in any state, received slightly less than 7 percent of the popular vote (5.7 million).

The demographic profile was consistent with the coalition of social and economic conservatives that Reagan had sought to construct. He had cut into the New Deal stronghold by taking 43 percent of the vote from households with union membership, while Carter won just 50 percent of the union vote—13 points less than he had received in 1976 (Anderson’s support among union members was a mere 5 percent). Reagan ran exactly even with Carter on support from manual workers at 48 percent each, but not as well as Nixon had in 1972, when he received 57 percent of their votes. Nevertheless, it was a substantial improvement over the 41 percent that Ford had received from the group in 1976.

Reagan was also successful with white-collar workers, 51 percent of whom cast their ballots for him, compared to 40 percent for Carter, a 10-point decline from his 1976 share. Of those in Gallup’s “professional and business” category, 55 percent voted for Reagan. Carter received 33 percent of these votes, again a decline from his 1976 level of 42 percent.

Reagan also outperformed Carter among voters with high-school and college educations. High-school graduates voted 51 percent for Reagan versus 43 percent for Carter. College grads went 53 percent for Reagan and 35 percent for Carter. The only educational category in which Carter soundly beat Reagan was voters with a grade-school education, 54 percent of whom went for Carter, as opposed to 42 percent for Reagan.

In his strategy memo, Caddell had emphasized the importance of the Catholic and Jewish vote, but support for the president among Catholics had declined from 57 percent in 1976 to 46 percent in 1980. Jewish voters had backed Carter two-to-one in 1976, but delivered only 45 percent of their vote to the president in 1980. And Carter’s 46 percent of the Protestant vote in 1976 diminished to 39 percent in 1980. Meanwhile, Reagan had carried 47 percent of the Catholic vote, 39 percent of the Jewish vote, and 54 percent of the Protestant vote, with Anderson taking the rest.

Forty-six percent of whites stood with Carter in 1976, but in 1980, he received only 36 percent of their votes to Reagan’s 56 percent. Nonwhites were the only racial category whose support for Carter held steady or increased: 85 percent of nonwhites had voted for Carter in
1976, rising to 86 percent in 1980. Reagan received only 10 percent of the nonwhite vote and Anderson 2 percent.

To win, Wirthlin noted in his campaign book, Reagan would have to score big among Democrats and independents. And in fact he did, attracting 26 percent of the Democratic vote, almost as much as Nixon (33 percent) had received in 1972. Among independents, 55 percent voted for Reagan (Nixon’s plurality among these voters had been 69 percent in 1972). Reagan also performed well within his own party, garnering 86 percent of Republican support, but not matching either Ford’s 91 percent or Nixon’s 95 of the GOP vote.

Regionally, Wirthlin had been prepared to concede the South and parts of the East in the event Reagan prevailed in every other corner of the country. Reagan’s actual geographic victory was impressive: he won 47 percent of the vote in the East (compared to Carter’s 43 percent); 51 percent in the Midwest (Carter got 41); 52 percent in the South (44 percent for Carter); and 54 percent in the West (to Carter’s 35).

The national election produced good results for Republicans more generally. Republicans gained 33 House seats and won control of the Senate, as well-known Democrats such as Birch Bayh, John Culver, Frank Church, Warren Magnuson, George McGovern, and Gaylord Nelson were defeated. The Democrats also lost control in top state-level posts. For instance, Arkansas governor Bill Clinton was defeated.108

Political scientist Robert Axelrod captured the thinking of many analysts following Carter’s 1976 presidential victory: “For the Democrats, the New Deal coalition made a comeback in 1976. . . . The Democrats got a majority of the votes from each of the six diverse minorities which make up their traditional coalition: the poor, blacks, union families, Catholics, southerners, and city dwellers.”109 Carter had reactivated the Democratic Party’s time-honored base in the “cities and the South,” despite what appeared to be Nixon’s undoing of the New Deal coalition in 1972. In 1980, however, Reagan did as well as Nixon had in 1972 among some New Deal segments, and better than Nixon among others. Reagan’s presidential victory marked the second time in recent history that deep inroads had been made into the old New Deal constituency.

It has been argued by Greg Markus, among others, that there is no solid evidence on which to claim that Reagan’s victory was due to his specific policy or ideological positions.110 We are not asserting that Reagan’s heresthetical message, which fully encompassed his policy positions, was the sole reason for his victory in 1980. We are suggesting
that the governor’s unanticipated move from the political Far Right to the center—redefined by him—of American politics was greatly facilitated by his unique appeals. Those appeals brought a diverse collection of voters into Reagan’s political orbit; they also made it difficult for Carter to find policy alternatives that would not hurt him with his core constituencies.

William Riker’s hypotheses are premised on the belief that issues and policies are of great consequence for any politician seeking to command the center. Going into the 1980 race, voter preferences on salient social issues such as abortion and the Equal Rights Amendment were much closer to the opinions of President Carter than they were to those of Governor Reagan. However, those issues “were essentially unrelated to voting choices,” according to scholars Paul Abramson, John Aldrich, and David Rohde. A November 1980 New York Times/CBS Poll found that 68 percent of those who voted for Reagan opposed his lack of support for the ERA. Abramson and his coauthors also noted that “most people favored Reagan on defense spending but opposed him on abortion.”

Political scientist Greg Adams has observed that “in 1980, most pro-lifers chose Carter over Reagan, while pro-choicers slightly favored Reagan. A number of scholars have looked at the 1980 presidential election and the years immediately following it and concluded that abortion was not a factor in voting or party identification.” The 1980 election clearly did not hinge on social issues, even though voters may have held strong opinions about them.

The analysis by Abramson et al. suggests that almost 90 percent of voters chose their candidate in 1980 according to their position on inflation and unemployment. Voters wanted a drastic change in the direction of the economy, considering it even more important than foreign and defense policy positions. According to the University of Michigan’s Survey Research Center, 56 percent of voters chose the economy as the most important issue in 1980, compared to 32 percent who chose defense. This margin was markedly narrower than it had been in earlier years, when 76 percent of voters ranked economic issues as most important and only 4 percent chose foreign policy. Clearly, candidates in 1980 needed to focus significantly more attention on foreign and defense policy issues than had been necessary in previous elections.

Social scientists have demonstrated that the American electorate was also concerned about government spending and the size of bureaucracy. One study found that apparently broad support for the continuation of
government services was diminished once this question was posed in terms of the need to reduce federal expenditures.\textsuperscript{115} The 1980 election was all about the economy, defense, and government regulation.

Reagan’s positions were important to many voters. According to Gallup Poll surveys, 17 percent of those who voted for him said they did so because of his economic policies; a further 14 percent backed him because of his overall policy stance. The November 1980 \textit{New York Times}/CBS poll reported that 60 percent of those who voted for Reagan agreed with the governor that inflation was more important than unemployment.\textsuperscript{116}

Reagan presented voters with a set of radical ideas about the economy and foreign relations, and linked these two issues in a way that suggested there need be no trade-off between guns and butter. In doing so, he staked out positions on the issues that most concerned voters and fundamentally shifted the debate about the economy and the role of the United States in the international system. This strategy directly contributed to some voters’ decision to cast their ballots for the challenger. He built a heresthetically grounded coalition of voters, amassing a broad coalition that was satisfied that Reagan’s approach to peace and prosperity was best. Many who voted for him seem to have been persuaded that they could have peace and they could have prosperity by reducing taxes, diminishing government regulations, and by increasing defense spending that would force the Soviet Union to adopt more realistic, cooperative policies.

Carter’s explicit adoption of any part of Reagan’s issue package would have been tantamount to admitting the failures of his administration. Yet the president’s continual attacks on Reagan’s policies made Carter appear disingenuous, suggesting that he lacked a plan of his own—a problem that his aides in fact acknowledged shortly after his defeat.\textsuperscript{117} Carter’s opposition to Reagan’s ideas prevented the president from cultivating support from the wider constituency he urgently needed. Carter was trapped. Yes, he was a victim of retrospective voting, but he was also a victim of an unrelenting heresthetical strategy.

In Richard Nixon, a skillful rhetorician, Reagan had faced an opponent he could not overcome. Nor had he been able to establish rhetorical independence from President Ford in 1976. By early 1977, however, Reagan was formulating a heresthetical message and identifying the coalition with whom this message would resonate. This heresthetical strategy bore rich fruit during the 1980 campaign.
Reagan’s positions on the economy, taxation, and defense spending are directly relevant to our understanding of the conclusion of the Cold War. If Jimmy Carter had been reelected in 1980, it is doubtful that relations with the Soviets (and later Russians) would have begun to thaw as they did in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Ronald Reagan’s election was a major step in bringing an end to the long Cold War.