

PETER JENKINS in America



Mr Carter is not an unpopular President—his problem is that a great many Americans don't think he is up to the job

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PUNDITS and pollsters have decreed already the theme for next year's presidential election. It is to be about leadership. The theory is that the reaction to Vietnam and Watergate has run its course. Now we have the reaction to the reaction. The country is ready once more for a stronger mould of presidencies. All that is needed is a man for the job.

By this kind of analysis, President Jimmy Carter is bracketed with former President Gerry Ford. They together are the interregnum, kind of anti-presidents. Maybe they were necessary; maybe Mr Carter did capture the arching, moralising mood of 1976, and fitted the bill as the anti-politician's politician; but that mood, we are told now, has evaporated and people are looking for more resolute and exciting leadership in the battles against energy dependence and inflation.

It is a temptingly neat theory and, moreover, there is something in it. Preaching the need for leadership is a polite way of obituarising the Carter presidency. "Leadership" is a code word for Kennedy. Indeed, according to Time magazine, he mentioned the words "leadership" and "leader" seventeen times in a single speech in Philadelphia last week. In so far as the media

purveys to the American public the notion that the election is about leadership Mr Carter is going to have a tough fight on his hands.

Mr Carter, to be sure, chimed with the spirit of the times in 1976 when he campaigned as the outsider who would bring decent values back to Washington. But it's usually advisable to leave the beckonings of history out of contemporary political analysis: campaign managers try to create candidates in what they suppose to be the image of the times while commentators tend to create the times in the image of the candidate; the result is a kind of collusive feedback.

Mr Carter in 1976 was in any case a lucky man. He stole an early march on a large field of lack-lustre Democratic candidates. Meanwhile, his Republican opponents were carving each other up. His adversary in the general election was an unelected president who had presided over the worst recession since the war and who had pardoned Richard Nixon for his crimes. Even then Mr Carter barely managed to win. Americans were not given much of a choice between styles of leadership or leaders in 1976.

If Mr Carter is undone, part of his undoing may be due to Americans continuing to expect from their presi-

dent more than he, or perhaps anyone else, could provide. Inflation and energy are the issues which concern people and machismo is not much help in tackling them. The White House has a list which it hands out to reporters and which is somewhat plaintively headed "Carter's problems other presidents did not have." It contains twelve points and they include: complexity of issues — energy, welfare, Panama, Middle East, inflation, lack of national consensus, decline of party, Congressional assertiveness, in budgetary matters as well as in foreign policy, and the rise of special interest groups.

President Carter frequently draws attention to the limits of government. His aides call this "educating the people in the realities of power" but it may also have had the effect of advertising the weakness of the President. At the same time it has fed the sense of pessimistic drift which the pollsters say is the mood of the nation. The President himself, on his descent from the mountain in July, declared — surely unwisely — there to be "a crisis of the American spirit."

To be sure there is a great deal of talk all round about the dangers of the decade ahead—an alleged Soviet



strategic superiority, increasing vulnerability to interruptions of oil supply from the Middle East, economic growth too slow to finance necessary social progress. Rather than looking like a man with the measure of such problems, Mr Carter has been talking again in quasi-religious terms, trying to persuade people to lower their expectations. What would you do if you were me?" he likes to ask the people who come to his community meetings. He throws the problems of the presidency back at them.

At the same time the White House is making strenuous efforts to sell the President's record, and, in many respects, his record is none-too bad. He has presided over prosperity at

home and peace abroad; he is making much of his claim to have been the first president in forty years not to have sent a single American boy to die for his country at war. A great deal of his legislation is through the Congress and where he has so far failed—on energy, inflation, and in the Middle East—it is not easy to see how others might have done better.

Yet the same opinion polls in which show a continuing high regard for the President's moral principles give him an approval rating lower even than Mr Nixon's when up to his ears in Watergate. Mr Carter is not an unpopular president—his problem is that a great many Americans don't think he is up to the job.

"He looks like an amateur," said one not ill-disposed senator. "He is kind of apolitical, he doesn't know how to handle shifting coalitions of power so as to get things done." This sort of view, common in Washington, finds its echo in the White House itself where at least one school of thought among his intimates thinks he made a mistake in trying to become too professional a president.

Here is what his Georgian image-maker, Gerald Rafshoon, told New Yorker writer Elizabeth Drew: "He was elected not to be a manager of the government, not to be immersed in the details, not to be institutionalised in his responses; people saw in Jimmy Carter someone who could lead the country, deal with the crisis of the spirit."

The Carter people like to think that the incompetence tag is a Washington insider's preoccupation, part of the arrogance and snobbishness they so resent. But that doesn't square with the opinion polls, nor with the experiences of many Congressmen and Senators. "I can tell you," said one, "This president looks just as incompetent in Peoria as he does in Washington, although that may not be such a vital subject in Peoria."

Part of Mr Carter's prob-

lem is that he lacks a stable base in the country. This is going to make it difficult to get himself re-elected but it has also made it difficult for him to govern. He was elected by a constituency of residuals, the left-overs from the old FDR coalition of the unionised, urban proletariat; the blacks and other minorities; and the South. But he has no consistent appeal for these groups, apart from his claim to the regional loyalty of the old South.

Even the blacks have lost their enthusiasm for him. As one of his aides explained: "The old interest group coalition simply doesn't work any more. That means that political power is less stable because it's easier for a challenger to put together a coalition than it is for an incumbent." In Mr Carter's case it meant that he was virtually a lame duck from the word go.

He has suffered from the denigration of the presidency which began, from the left, at the time of the Vietnam war and now continues from all sides but especially from the ultra-patriotic right. Mr Carter is accused of appeasing the Soviets and kowtowing to OPEC. Unfortunately, the label "weak guy" is not at once belied by his appearance and demeanour.

All Washington was buzz-

ing when I was there with accounts of his unfortunate appearance in the locker room of the Pittsburgh Pirates after they had won the World Series. Apparently he looked very small and out of place as the television commentator and the players went on talking baseball.

But if Mr Carter looks vulnerable and almost out of place in the White House, that is more due to the issues which confront him than to the deficiencies of his style. Inflation is bad business for incumbents the world over and in America prices are rising at an annual rate of 13 per cent. For Americans this is appalling and people talk extravagantly of having their savings wiped out. More than Vietnam, more than anything, OPEC has shocked Americans into an awareness of the limits of their power and the degrees of their dependence.

The resultant atmosphere is one congenial to simple solutions and quick fixes. President Carter is offering no simple solutions, rather he is preaching that there is none. But the American political process is a factory for mass-producing expectations: already it is on the go and already eyes are lifting to the horizon looking for a man on white horseback.

Tomorrow: America—lost in a new world.