30 DECEMBER 2024 / When Carter called out America

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): President Jimmy Carter lived long enough to imagine how he’d be remembered. And then some.

SCORING IN - Bees

SEAN: He was the first president to make it to triple digits! But that’s a weird accomplishment. ‘Former peanut farmer’ comes up pretty quickly in all the obits. Kinda meh in office. Pretty much GOAT status post-presidency. And just about every obituary mentions *one* speech he gave. It wasn’t an inauguration or a farewell or a State of the Union. Most people refer to it as the “malaise speech”, even though he never says the word.

KEVIN MATTSON (historian): Well, here was a president taking on the central issue of the problems of consumerism and pointing to Americans that something had to be changed in the way that they’d behave on a daily basis.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will.*

SEAN: We’re dedicating this whole episode of *Today, Explained* to that one speech.

SCORING OUT

[THEME]

SEAN: On a Sunday night in the summer of 1979, President Carter got on the TV to speak to the country from the Oval Office. On *Today, Explained* we’re going to look back at what he had to say with Kevin Mattson – a historian who wrote a whole book about that one speech. It felt worth Kevin’s time – and yours – because that night, President Carter called out what many think of as a central pillar of American life: cap-it-al-ism.

KEVIN: Consumerism and the want of things was creating an unsustainable world. And the oil crisis was making that clear to people, staring them in the face.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.*

KEVIN: How many times have we heard a president in the past take on the selfishness of consumerism and say it's a significant problem for Americans? And the fact that he called individualism into question was, again, what made the speech exceptional. You usually don't use that line, you know, because Americans like to think of themselves as individuals and here he was, you know, attacking that and showing its shortcomings. So I think that that's probably back to why I get more and more entranced in the content of the speech. I started wanting to kind of dig down deeper because I think I had never seen a president in the United States call into question the consumerist lifestyle that Americans are known for.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Why have we not been able to get together as a nation to resolve our serious energy problem? It's clear that the true problems of our nation are much deeper, deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession, and I realized more than ever that as president, I need your help.

KEVIN: It's July 15th, 1979. The thing that Carter just stated is pointing to something that's really disturbing to a lot of Americans, which are these long gas lines that are forming at gas stations.

SCORING IN - Old Technology Has My Heart

*<CLIP> MACNEIL/LEHRER: Anger and bewilderment are growing as more and more Americans cope with gasoline lines and empty pumps. For millions of Americans, this may be the worst weekend they've ever faced for finding gasoline to give them the automobile freedom they take as their due.*

KEVIN: And what, what happens on these gas lines? People are getting in fist fights. There's a woman who puts these pillows up under her dress to make it look like she's pregnant, so she could cut into the line and say, I need gas for me and my unborn child. And then the pillows fall out and people start to throw things at her. I mean, it's just total chaos.

*<CLIP> MACNEIL/LEHRER: Gasoline shortages are spreading across the country . Odd-even service, gasoline lines, and closed gas stations are becoming increasingly common.*

KEVIN: One of the things that they would do at these gas lines is that the gas attendant would take a poster and say, “Last car,” and put it on the window of, where if they went past that, they would run out of gas and, people would get, jump into the cars, take the signs, put them back 25 spaces so that other people could get gas, and it was kind of like individualism coming to the fore in a really ugly way. I mean, the threats of violence, the actual violence, people just looking for their self-interest. I think that kind of was one of the key things that made Jimmy Carter really worry about individualism and consumerism as to that it could lead to such awful fights that were being engaged in by normal, ordinary Americans. That's, I think, the foremost issue that's on Carter's mind, that's happening in the streets of the country at this time.

*<CLIP> MACNEIL/LEHRER, GAS STATION ATTENDANT: You tell that goddamn Governor he’s got to police this goddamn gasoline situation. I will not take the blame for this thing, I will not take the crap and harassment from these customers. Now let him police it or stop selling gas.*

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: I will soon submit legislation to Congress calling for the creation of this nation's first solar bank, which will help us achieve the crucial goal of 20% of our energy coming from solar power by the year 2000.*

KEVIN: He did install solar panels on the White House, and I think it was kind of a practical thing. I mean, it would reduce energy cost obviously and reliance upon on, foreign oil. It reminds me also of an early episode in Jimmy Carter's presidency and he's fairly famous for this, where he sits with a cardigan sweater with a fireplace next to him, and he basically says, Turn down the thermostats, because we're wasting energy.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: All of us must learn to waste less energy. Simply by keeping our thermostats, for instance, at 65 degrees in the daytime and 55 degrees at night we could save half the current shortage of natural gas.*

KEVIN: It symbolized both, “I'm the president of the United States, but I'm gonna do something.” He's doing stuff concretely in his own behavior. I mean, I can't read how Americans would respond to that, but I think that they would think at least he's not a hypocrite. He's actually putting his money where his mouth is and there's something to that that I think makes Jimmy Carter attractive as we look back upon both him and what's followed in his wake.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER:*  *This is not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning. These changes did not happen overnight. They've come upon us gradually over the last generation, years that were filled with shocks and tragedy. We were sure that ours was a nation of the ballot, not the bullet, until the murders of John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. We were taught that our armies were always invincible, and our causes were always just only to suffer the agony of Vietnam. We respected the presidency as a place of honor until the shock of Watergate.*

KEVIN: The distrust that he's, I think talking about there amongst the general American public is really strong. And he's basically saying, “We made mistakes. I made mistakes. We're all making mistakes,” which again, shows the kind of radical nature of this speech is that he's sharing the blame, but he's also saying that things like Watergate and Vietnam, you can't just slough them off. They are things that leave a huge imprint on American political culture. So I think that there's a kind of growing distrust he's trying to address and trying to push back on.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship, self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning.*

KEVIN: He's got this mix of touting traditional values in contrast with the consumer culture that dominates at this time. To take that on, to put that front and center, saying essentially, let's stop paying attention to all the scenes in the gas lines. Let's get beyond that sort of stuff and realize that there's something much deeper that's troubling and that is a reliance upon consumer goods and trying to seek our own happiness out of all the things that we want to get. Keep in mind that Jimmy Carter was notorious for teaching Sunday school. He has a kind of minister's tone in some of these passages. But I don't think that he's just simply blaming or scolding the American people because he prefaces everything with pointing out to his own faults. Usually people who are scolding don't say, I'm also a part of the problem.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: We can manage the short term shortages more effectively and we will, but there are no short term solutions to our long range problems. There is simply no way to avoid sacrifice.*

KEVIN: We're gonna have to sacrifice. I think that's the bottom line is what Carter's saying, and he's calling people back to sacrifice and he's saying there are things we can do in our day to day lives, we can turn down the thermostat. We can try not to drive our cars everywhere we go. I think that he sees a way to get back to a better place, but it's gonna take sacrifices, it's gonna take people doing something in their ordinary lives. And that's again, a rarity. I think that, where do we see our government actually interacting with ordinary citizens to actually push through a policy that includes, at least in part, sacrifice and living within one's means?

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: I do not promise you that this struggle for freedom will be easy. I do not promise a quick way out of our nation's problems when the truth is that the only way out is an all out effort. What I do promise you is that I will lead our fight and I will enforce fairness in our struggle, and I will ensure honesty and above all I will act.*

KEVIN: You can really hear the war language there, you know, mobilize, I'll be your leader. But we have to sacrifice and, and pay attention to one another. What he wants to aim for is to build a kind of simpler society. Maybe one where consumption wasn't so widespread and taking things over, but also at the same time, It's gotta push back against our overreliance upon foreign sources of oil.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER:*  *We know the strength of America. We are strong. We can regain our unity, We can regain our confidence. We are the heirs of generations who survived threats, much more powerful and awesome than those that challenge us now.*

SCORING IN - CEZ\_MAG\_6017\_00401\_Feeling\_Fine\_APM

SEAN: He doesn’t make it seem like that tall an order, though he’s probably throwing out ideas that are very foreign to the American people.

KEVIN: I think that has to just be called a contradiction. I mean, the speech opens up with such a long treatment of all the problems that the country faced historically. To turn it around on the kind of optimistic note, if anything that's the part in the speech that every time I read it I'm like … eh, you know, you've set out a pretty difficult course to chart and to just kind of slough it off and say, Well, we, we have the confidence we can do it, we've done it before I think that's the part of the speech, at least for myself, that rings slightly hollow.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: With God's help and for the sake of our nation, it is time for us to join hands in America. Let us commit ourselves together to a rebirth of the American spirit. Working together with our common faith we cannot fail. Thank you and good night.*

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: When *Today, Explained* returns – Kevin’s gonna tell us how this speech helped sink Jimmy’s chance at a second term.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> MAN STANDING IN LINE FOR GAS: I’m in a line two hours and I can’t get gas?! This is baloney! Carter doesn’t get my vote next year.*

SEAN: Kevin Mattson, you wrote a whole book about Jimmy Carter's Crisis of Confidence speech. Tell us, how did Americans respond to this speech in the days and weeks after it was given?

KEVIN: There is a whole slew of letters in the Carter Library. And all of them basically say, I'm gonna do something. I'm gonna take your lead. And with that language of war, I'm gonna take your lead and I'm gonna do something basic to my everyday life. I'm gonna walk to work, I'm gonna bicycle, I'm gonna do all these things that are gonna help us get through this energy crisis. And, the speech boosts Carter's polling by about 10%. People react favorably and say, Yeah, I'm ready to do this. I'm ready to join in. I wanna be a part of the cause.

SEAN: Of course, this speech becomes known as as Carter's malaise speech because it becomes a political cudgel against him.

KEVIN: Yeah, that's right. I mean, 10 days or so later after giving the speech, Jimmy Carter fires his entire cabinet. And it's much to the shock of people who are saying, Wait, what's this all about? He's projecting now a style of being like disorganized . So his polls dropped down. So he is got like, you know, maybe about 10 days in which the poll numbers are looking good and then all of a sudden they crash. And it's a person who's basically an advisor to Ronald Reagan, Richard Wirthlin, who's Reagan's pollster. And he said at the moment, ‘I knew once the speech was given that we were gonna win in 1980, and that Ronald Reagan was gonna beat Jimmy Carter.’ Because people don't like to hear about malaise. They want a leader who projects a much more happy sort of style, which Reagan obviously did terribly well.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT REAGAN: For the first time in our memory, many Americans are asking, Does history still have a place for America, for her people, for her great ideals? There are some who answer no, that our energy is spent, our days of greatness at an end, that a great national malaise is upon us. They say we must cut our expectations, conserve and withdraw, that we must tell our children not to dream as we once dreamed.*

KEVIN: They want a leader who projects a much more happy sort of style, which Reagan obviously did terribly well. And they don't wanna be scolded, they don't wanna be told what's wrong with them. And Reagan starts to build this thing where he is saying There's nothing wrong with the American people, the problem is with the leadership.

Now it's not just Reagan. He's facing opposition from Ted Kennedy:

*<CLIP> TED KENNEDY: We’re facing the fact that Mr. Carter will not come out of the White House or the Rose Garden, but we’re going to get him out of the White House and Rose Garden! (Cheers)*

KEVIN: Kennedy basically says something similar to Ronald Reagan I, that, you know, the American people should not be blamed for their problems. We need better leadership than that.. So Carter gets kind of nailed on both sides of the political spectrum. And that's where Carter just sinks. I mean, there's no going back at that point in time. And obviously the election is not too far off where he does take a pretty big hit and loses the White House.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: The people of the United States have made their choice, and, of course, I accept that decision but, I have to admit, not with the same enthusiasm that I accepted the decision 4 years ago.*

SEAN: I was just a wee lad when Reagan was in office, but whenever I read about Reagan's tenure or see or hear footage from his speeches, his campaign rallies, it feels like his entire vibe was one of, you know, unquestioning love of country. Like a confidence without crisis,

KEVIN: Yeah

SEAN: But not the kind of confidence Carter was calling for in his speech. Is that sort of a, a tragic irony of his presidency that he's followed by this guy who exudes this immense confidence, but without any of the introspection that Jimmy Carter was calling for in this moment?

KEVIN: Absolutely. Reagan's the president who calls Vietnam an honorable cause, and it's Reagan who projects the kind of smiley face politics that I think makes him leap to the front. Actually, in the Carter Library are the solar panels that Ronald Reagan ripped down from the White House. Reagan represents the make believe idea that there really is no energy crisis. There's nothing wrong. We can continue to rely upon foreign sources of oil. We can drill in the Arctic Refuge or wherever. That sort of easy hopefulness is, I think, what defines Ronald Reagan.

SEAN: Did any of that make Carter regret giving this speech? Did he ever end up feeling like he, he made a bad call in asking Americans to sort of change their behavior, change their, their goals in life, even?

KEVIN: I don't think Carter ever regretted giving the speech. He did regret the cabinet firings. He did say, I remember in his memoirs that that was a big mistake. But the speech itself, no, I think he'd stand by it. I think he, he would say, I basically did what I should have done. And I got badly injured because I had people on, on the different ends of the political spectrum attacking me in the same ways. And I had, I had the mainstream press basically saying that I had made a big mistake. And that's also where you start to hear the term that's never used in the speech, “malaise,” being used, is in magazine articles that cover the speech.

SEAN: Does he continue to address this crisis of confidence once he leaves the White House?

KEVIN: Basically what he says at one point in time is that if I have to become a citizen again, I'm fine with that.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: I will lay down my official responsibilities in this office to take up once more the only title in our democracy superior to that of president, the title of citizen.*

KEVIN: His life after losing was full of public service. I mean, he's probably the president who's done the most on public service. I'm running down the, the chain of presidents, I'm not hitting upon anyone who I think really honestly took up the role of a citizen in improving his society other than Jimmy Carter.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT CARTER: We've built almost 5,000 houses now. It's been one of the most gratifying and challenging and difficult things we've ever done.*

KEVIN: Habitat for Humanity, a lot of the universal human rights activities that he's been involved in. I think they showed to him that there's a role for politicians to play in legislating and stuff like that. But citizens have a responsibility to doing work that might be even more important, which is caring for one another, having solidarity with others sacrificing on the ground. He was not being dishonest when he said, Okay, I'll be a citizen instead of the president. because I can do maybe even more than I could do as president, as a citizen.

SEAN: Hm. Do you think the speech was just way too ahead of its time? I mean, this is Jimmy Carter almost 50 years ago talking about how we need to get America off you know, OPEC dependence and install solar panels across the country and how it's gonna be expensive, but you know, it's gonna be an investment in American energy and American jobs. It's exactly the kind of thing you hear Joe Biden saying.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT BIDEN: For too long we failed to use the most important word when it comes to meeting the climate crisis: jobs, jobs, jobs.*

SEAN: Was he just way too early for this country? Was he way too ahead of the curve?

KEVIN: Probably - there's an element of, of where he's far ahead of his time and that perhaps we're seeing a kind of reenactment. Although, the other obvious thing is that we're so much more polarized now than, than we were when Jimmy Carter gave the speech. I mean, this is still the time in which Carter could, you know, talk to Republicans and, and be on a, on a good basis with them. And where the kind of public mistrust, at least in terms of partisanship, has hadn't gotten out of, out of whack the way it has today.

SEAN: Do you think this crisis of confidence Jimmy Carter wanted to talk about in this speech is still being faced by Americans today?

KEVIN: I think so.

SCORING IN - AXS\_AXS\_2418\_00401\_Nostalgic\_Classical\_Piano\_APM

SEAN: The reason that I wrote the book was because I found that my undergraduates who read it for the first time were so amazed by the spirit behind it and that they wished that they had a president in their own day and age, and this was during the reign of George W. Bush, that they wished they had a president who told the truth, who was honest, who was forthcoming, who called people to action. I think that for sure, there are people who are yearning for getting around all the polarization, confronting problems seriously, and finding some sense of unity in a process of self-sacrifice. Now, I say that with, with, with a cautionary tone because I was alarmed at how, with the pandemic, Americans' individualism came out again in full force, right? It's, I, you can't force me to do something that's for the collective good. That makes me wonder how much we still have any of the kind of spirit that sits behind the speech.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Kevin Mattson is the author of: *What the Heck Are You Up To Mr. President? Jimmy Carter, America's Malaise and the Speech That Should Have Changed the Country.* Find it. Read it.

I’m Sean Rameswaram. Our episode today was edited by Matthew Collette and Miranda Kennedy, produced by Jillian Weinberger, mixed by Paul Robert Mounsey and Rob Byers, and fact-checked by Serena Solin and Laura Bullard. Some of them are missed. Some of them are still here. Happy New Year! Or just … New Year! if you’re not that happy about it. *Today, Explained* will be back and ready for whatever’s coming on January 2nd.

SCORING OUT - AXS\_AXS\_2418\_00401\_Nostalgic\_Classical\_Piano\_APM

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]