

Examining Carter's 'Malaise Speech,' 30 Years Later

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Author Kevin Mattson's new book examines the underlying themes of President Carter's famous 1979 speech.

Independence Day, 1979: Lines at gas pumps stretch for blocks, and President Jimmy Carter is scheduled to address the nation. But when he cancels last minute and disappears from the public eye, rumors spread of a health problem or, even worse, that he's left the country. After 10 days, he reemerges with a speech — to address the energy crisis, unemployment, inflation and something else a bit more nebulous:

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

The speech was later dubbed the "malaise speech," even though Carter never used that word.

"Jimmy Carter had grown increasingly convinced that Americans had to face up to the energy crisis, but they only could do this if they faced up to the crisis in their own values," says Kevin Mattson, author of *"What the Heck Are You Up To, Mr. President?"*, which examines the underlying themes of Carter's speech. "He tried to push the energy crisis on to a kind of moral and civic plane, and the speech was used to unify around a sense of civic sacrifice."

Mattson tells NPR's Liane Hansen that Carter did some serious soul-searching before giving the speech, and he hoped to entice Americans to do the same.

"He wanted the country to become much more self-inquisitive," he says.

The reception to Carter's speech was overwhelmingly positive: Approving phone calls poured into the White House — more calls than when President Richard Nixon had announced the invasion of Cambodia — along with many letters of support. But the goodwill was short lived. Within days of the speech, Carter fired several members of his cabinet, closing what Mattson calls "a window of opportunity."

"It's from then on that Carter had a really difficult time at bouncing back and being seen on the part of the American people as a strong and significant leader — especially a leader that could take America through solving the energy crisis," Mattson says.

"Carter goes out there and he essentially condemns the American way of life," he says. "He says our consumerism, our materialism have really gotten in the way of this problem."

Mattson says the fact that Americans responded positively to a speech that berated their way of life suggests that they don't mind having their values called into question. In that way, he says, the malaise speech had the potential to effect a significant cultural change.

"[Carter] did blow the opportunity," Mattson says. "But I think the original success that the speech had symbolizes the fact that Americans will listen when they're being criticized and when they're being called out to their better selves."

NPR. <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=106508243>>.

Malaise: a vague sense of physical, mental, or moral ill-being