

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #12

In 1976 the Democrats could hardly wait for the presidential election. They were salivating over the turmoil that had existed in the nation since the Watergate fiasco had led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon in 1974. His successor, Gerald Ford, who inherited several simmering problems at home and abroad when he assumed office, had enjoyed widespread popular support for only a short time. His pardon of Nixon on September 8, 1974, although a prudent and wise move designed to heal the nation, had generated a storm of criticism. By resisting congressional pressure to reduce taxes and increase federal spending, Ford had succeeded in plummeting the American economy into the deepest recession since the Great Depression. In foreign policy limited, but significant, achievements in the Middle East and in arms-control accord with the Soviet Union should have strengthened Ford's image. But they were drowned in the sea of criticism and carping that followed the collapse of South Vietnam in May, 1975.

At the Republican convention Ford managed to fend off a powerful challenge for the nomination from the former California governor and Hollywood actor, Ronald Reagan. Because even the Republicans were divided over Ford's leadership and because Ford had not solved economic and energy problems within the nation, whoever the Democrats nominated seemed to be a shoo-in for the presidency.

Surprisingly, the Democrats chose an obscure former naval officer turned peanut farmer, who had served one term as governor of Georgia. James Earl "Jimmy" Carter campaigned harder than any of the other Democrat hopefuls and emerged from that pack to win the presidential nomination of his party in 1976. Skeptical journalists first responded, "Jimmy who?" When Carter told his mother that he intended to run for president, she had asked, "President of what?" Capitalizing on the post-Watergate cynicism and his down-home image, Carter, a thoughtful man, pledged to restore morality to the White House. He promised voters, "I will never lie to the American people." He cited his inexperience as an outsider in the byways of Washington politics as an asset, even though he selected Senator Walter Mondale of Minnesota as his running mate to ensure his ties to traditional Democrat voting blocs. Carter promised to revive the moral presidency of Woodrow Wilson.

*Newsweek* magazine declared 1976 "The Year of the Evangelical." Billy Graham and other evangelical preachers in the 1950s and 1960s had laid the groundwork for the Fourth Great Awakening – a resurgence of evangelical Protestantism that emphasized an intimate, personal salvation of being "born again," a focus on a literal interpretation of the *Bible*, and a conviction in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the central message of Christianity. The secular liberalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s had sparked a countervailing evangelical revival – of which Carter was an advocate. Many Americans regarded feminism, the counterculture, sexual freedom, homosexuality, pornography, divorce, and legalized abortion not as distinct issues, but as a collective sign of moral decay in American society. To seek answers and to find order, more and more people turned to

evangelical denominations, especially those of Southern Baptist, Pentecostal, and Assemblies of God churches. Membership in evangelical churches soared, as the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination, grew by 23 percent, while the Assemblies of God increased by an astounding 300 percent. In a national Gallup poll, 34 percent of Americans answered “yes” when asked, “Would you describe yourself as a ‘born again’ or evangelical Christian?” In 1976 the American people elected Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist, as the nation’s first evangelical president. In the midst of the continuing revulsion against the political corruption unearthed by the Watergate inquiries, he preached the need for national repentance, personal self-sacrifice, and redemption.

With the help of a skilled Atlanta advertising team, and by his own full-time campaigning for over a year, the politician from Georgia outdistanced his better-known rivals and sewed up the nomination before the Democrat convention met. Facing the prospect of the first president from the Deep South since Zachary Taylor in 1849, the media gorged themselves on “Southern fried chic.” Reporters began to speculate that Carter’s native region harbored some forgotten virtues after all.

To the surprise of many so-called political experts, Carter revived the New Deal coalition of Southern whites, blacks, urban labor, and ethnic groups to win a popular majority of 50% to 48 % – 41 million votes to 39 million for Ford. Carter’s electoral vote majority was narrow – 297 to 241. A heavy turnout of blacks in the South enabled him to sweep every state in that region except Virginia. He also benefited from the appeal of Mondale, his liberal running mate and a favorite among blue-collar workers and the urban poor. Carter lost most of the trans-Mississippi West. The big story of the election was the low voter turnout. One reporter commented, “Neither Ford nor Carter won as many votes as Mr. Nobody.” Almost half the eligible voters, apparently alienated by Watergate and the lackluster candidates, chose to sit out the election. Ford still might have prevailed, but his pardon of Nixon likely cost him enough votes in key states to swing the election to Carter.

For awhile, the new president got some mileage as a Washington outsider. After being sworn in by Chief Justice Warren Burger on inauguration day, January 20, 1977, President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, disdained the traditional limousine, and, representing the common men and women of the nation, displayed folksy charm and walked down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. Wearing a cardigan sweater, he delivered televised fireside chats to the American people. The fact that he was a “born again” Christian played well for awhile. Eventually, however, once in office, Carter suffered the fate of all American presidents since Kennedy. After an initial honeymoon period with the American people, his inexperience began to show, and his popularity began to wane.