

What Carter said, people didn't want to hear

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Jimmy Carter is getting another look in the midst of a health crisis afflicting the 90-year-old former chief executive.

So now is as good a time as any to remember what's been dubbed the "Malaise speech."

Carter, of course, never used that phrase to describe the talk he delivered in the summer of 1979 when the nation was backed up in lines waiting for gasoline.

But it remains a remarkable address.

Carter was unflinching in assessing his first three years in office: ... "I've worked hard to put my campaign promises into law - and I have to admit, with just mixed success."

He reported back what he had heard from fellow politicians and ordinary Americans:

- "This from a Southern governor: 'Mr. President, you are not leading this nation - you are just managing the government.' "
- "This from a young woman in Pennsylvania: 'I feel so far from government. I feel like ordinary people are excluded from political power.' "
- "And I like this one particularly from a black woman who happens to be the mayor of a small Mississippi town: 'The big shots are not the only ones who are important. Remember, you can't sell anything on Wall Street unless someone digs it up somewhere else first.' "

Then a president famous for candor - whether it was telling Playboy magazine he lusted in his heart for other women or later, in the 1980 election blowout, conceding before the polls had closed in the Western states - turned his attention to the country.

It was facing a "crisis of confidence."

People no longer had faith that the times ahead would improve.

They were more concerned with what people owned than what they did.

"Two-thirds of our people do not even vote," Carter said. "There is a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media and other institutions."

The blame, he said, could be found in two decades of shocks - political assassination, an unpopular and lost war in southeast Asia, Watergate, inflation and the energy crisis.

"What you see too often in Washington and elsewhere around the country is a system of government that seems incapable of action," he continued. "You see a Congress twisted and pulled in every direction by hundreds of well-financed and powerful special interests. You see every extreme position defended to the last vote, almost to the last breath by one unyielding group or another. You often see a balanced and fair approach that demands sacrifice, a little sacrifice from everyone, abandoned like an orphan without support and without friends."

Then Carter urged the country to rouse itself into action. He outlined a national energy policy consisting of alternative fuels - including coal and shale - while pursuing conservation.

With the benefit of 36 years hindsight, you have to concede Carter was right, almost prescient - even if his delivery felt like that of an overly dour prophet.

Contrary to political mythology, the speech drew a positive response. It was not until Carter purged his cabinet later that summer that the public mood turned against him.

But never again would a president attempt to deliver such grim news to the American people.

Instead, you got the sunny disposition of Ronald Reagan's "morning in America." Even in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror attacks, George W. Bush asked no more sacrifice of his fellow Americans than to go out and continue shopping.

The lesson for the generations of politicians who followed Carter became: Give the people what they want - even if they know they're being misled.

At a time when Donald Trump is a viable contender for president, need we say more? - M.T.