

## [ISSF Policy Series: Is Donald Trump Jimmy Carter, or is he Kaiser Wilhelm II?](#)

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**“Is Donald Trump Jimmy Carter, or is he Kaiser Wilhelm II?”**

Essay by **Nancy Mitchell**, North Carolina State University

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Editors: Robert Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse  
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**Moderator:** *When have we ever seen this before?*

**Pundit:** *Never. President Trump’s action is unprecedented. Extraordinary. There’s never been anything like it.*

These are tough times for historians. I’m referring not just to the proposed elimination of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Wilson Center, but to the more profound psychological sense that I have experienced, as President Donald Trump has overtaken the news cycle, of freefall. I am grappling for a toehold.

I realized, as Trump rose to power, that one reason I am a historian is that I take comfort in making sense of the world through seeing historical parallels. But Trump defies analogues.

During the campaign, I grasped onto the idea that there were parallels between Trump and Jimmy Carter.

I hasten to stipulate at the outset that I am not referring to the cartoon image of Carter as an inept loser. That assessment of the 39<sup>th</sup> president has provided an essential foil to the idea that Ronald Reagan saved the nation, but it is contradicted by the facts. Jimmy Carter had more legislative and foreign policy successes than most modern presidents: the Camp David accords, the normalization with China, the Panama Canal treaties, the resolution of the war in Rhodesia. The United States was in a stronger global position in 1981 than it had been in 1977.

And I am not correlating, in any way, Carter’s character with that of Donald Trump.

I'm referring to Carter as a real outsider, like Trump. This meant that they faced some comparable challenges. Both were eschewed by their parties. Late in the primary campaign of 1976, as it dawned on the Democrats that Carter might actually wrest the nomination from the establishment Democrats vying for the honor, they launched the ABC - Anyone But Carter - movement, much as the Republicans belatedly and unsuccessfully tried to derail Trump's march.

Moreover, both Trump and Carter are hard to pigeon-hole ideologically. Carter was not a typical Southern Democrat of the 1970s. Yet he was not an establishment Democrat either. He was a born-again Southern Baptist from the deep South - from what Andrew Young (an aide to Martin Luther King, Jr., and then Carter's United Nations ambassador) deemed the most racist county of Georgia. Yet Carter seemed relatively liberal on racial issues, while also being fiscally conservative. The press was baffled by him. Likewise, Trump defies political categories: during the campaign he sometimes seemed more liberal than most Republicans (e.g., in his initial response to North Carolina's 'bathroom bill' and in his promises not to cut Social Security) while at his rallies he often seemed to be the mouthpiece of the xenophobic and nationalist rightwing fringe.

It seemed likely that Trump, like Carter, would launch an overly ambitious agenda, overestimating, in the euphoria of his unexpected victory, his ability to push complex legislation through Congress - even a Congress that, in Carter's case, was controlled by the Democrats, just as Trump's is controlled by the Republicans. Carter later rued his lack of a singular focus. Almost wistfully, he contrasted his cluttered agenda in 1977 with what "Reagan did, I think wisely, in 1981 with a major premise and deliberately excluding other conflicting or confusing issues. It ... gave the image ... of strong leadership and an ultimate achievement. We didn't do that."<sup>u</sup>

I also expected that Trump, like Carter, would neglect his role as leader of the Republican Party, just as Carter had given short shrift to his leadership of the Democratic Party. Neither man owed his victory to the party; in fact, both resented that the party had not embraced them. But Carter later understood that his neglect of this role had cost him - in political terms during his presidency as well as in terms of his reputation afterwards. Jimmy Carter, narrowly elected by a fragile and unlikely coalition, left office without a constituency. And the Democratic Party, which had never warmed to him, left him to twist in the wind as the Reagan team said again and again that their man had saved the country from disaster.

Both of those predictions might turn out to be true. Trump might try to do too much too fast, and he might suffer because of his strained relations with the Republican Party.

But another of my predictions has turned out to be greatly mistaken.

I didn't take Twitter into account.

During the 1976 campaign, the press had been intrigued by Carter, happily taking stabs at answering the question, "What makes Jimmy tick?" But a year or so into his presidency, journalists had grown frustrated by the difficulty of explaining Carter's hard-to-pigeonhole ideology. And, as the war in the Horn of Africa exploded, they hit on a much simpler way of describing the Carter presidency: it was a struggle between the hawkish National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the dovish Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance. Jimmy Carter was lost on the shuffle.

I thought Trump would suffer a similar fate, and his presidency would be depicted as a struggle between his establishment Chief of Staff Reince Priebus and his antiestablishment Chief Strategist Steve Bannon. I thought it likely that Trump would be lost in the shuffle.

Was I wrong! Trump's use of Twitter has kept him, not his aides, front and center. This is new. Presidents have been known to the public – and to historians -- through a scrim of formality. We hear their speeches and their carefully controlled press conferences. When writing about Carter, my biggest challenge was to figure out, through the deluge of documents, what Carter was thinking, what motivated his decisions.

Trump's Twitter account fills this void. It will profoundly affect historians' analyses of his administration.

While Trump-as-candidate shared structural similarities with Carter-as-candidate, Trump as president is so different from Carter as president – in his indifference to morality, his lack of self-discipline, his militarism, and his lies – that by February I felt once again in freefall, without an analogue.

As soon as a label seemed to fit – Trump was an isolationist or a man bent on overturning the post-World War Two order or a populist – the President would do something to make nonsense of all labels. He seems to have no guiding principles that could define his foreign policy. His foreign policy, to date, has been defined by two of his character traits: he is impulsive and defensive.

I sought another analogue. I listened to the sometimes whispered, sometimes overt comparisons to Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler. Trump's rallies can be, indeed, alarming. But as Trump began to govern, I decided there was another German leader who can shed more light on him: Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Wilhelm II, the last German emperor, ruled Germany from 1888 to 1918, and his unpredictability and his bombastic rhetoric profoundly destabilized the balance of power. Like Trump, he was enamored of the military, and he determined that his grand accomplishment would be to build a great German navy.

The problem was that this made no sense: German ports were effectively landlocked by the English Channel. What was Wilhelm's plan? Was he crazy like a fox, or just plain crazy?

This uncertainty rocked the great powers. Britain decided it needed to pull its fleet from its far-flung empire to protect the homeland – because the only logical explanation for Wilhelm's great naval buildup was that he was planning to attack Britain. The United States took advantage of the opportunity to establish firm control over the Caribbean and Central America, all the while arguing that if Washington did not do so, Berlin would.

The Kaiser's bellows – his Fox News, Infowars and Rush Limbaugh – were the pan-Germans, who lathered up the German people to seek their destiny in a Greater Germany, a vast empire that would unite, embolden and multiply all German people. The Kaiser's relationship with the pan-Germans was never exactly clear, and some dismissed their rhetoric as ravings.

But the rhetoric mattered. It was dangerous. It fueled real fears and it justified power-grabs by other nations. In 1915, for example, the United States claimed its occupation of Haiti was necessary to

keep the country from the Germans.

Trump's bellicosity, his unpredictability, and his words matter. They stimulate real fears and they can - and I fear will -- be used to justify aggression.

Like Wilhelm II before him, Trump may be blustering and blundering toward war.

**Nancy Mitchell** is the author of *Race and the Cold War: Jimmy Carter in Africa* (2016) which was awarded the American Academy of Diplomacy's Douglas Dillon Award, and *The Danger of Dreams: German and American Imperialism in Latin America, 1895-1914* (1999). She contributed the chapter on "The Cold War and Jimmy Carter," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War* (2010) and that on "The United States and Europe, 1900-1914," in *American Foreign Relations since 1600: A Guide to the Literature Online*, (2007). Her articles have appeared in *Cold War History*, *International History Review*, *Diplomatic History*, *Prologue*, *Journal of American History*, *H-Diplo*, and *H-Pol*. She received her PhD from the School of Advanced International Study of the Johns Hopkins University, and she is a professor of history at North Carolina State University where she was elected to the Academy of Outstanding Teachers. Her next project is an analysis of U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Interview with Jimmy Carter," 29 November 1982, Miller Center of Public Affairs of the University of Virginia, 23.