

Chapter II

“Born Again”

Both in his autobiography and in his 1976 campaign, Carter disclosed that at about the age of 40 he “first experienced in a personal and intense way the presence of the Holy Spirit” and was “born again.”

Because of my Russian background, I was unfamiliar with the “born again” phenomenon. I did some research to find out more clearly when the event happened and what it signified. Carter’s other statement yielded more information. He said that he had a “psychological problem” which had resulted from his defeat in the Democratic primary election for the Georgia Governorship in September 1966.

I was going through a stage in my life there that was a very difficult one. I had run for Governor and lost. Everything I did was not gratifying. When I succeeded in something, I got no pleasure out of it. When I failed at something, it was a horrible experience for me.

When Carter was asked whether he had an emotional breakdown at that time, he replied, “That’s an exaggeration.”

Miss Lillian said that after that defeat Carter “cried like a baby.” She observed, “I hate to use the word ruthless, but Jimmy’s going to win or bust. He’ll go through hell to get what he wants....” The press reported recollections of friends who said Carter hugged a friend good buy with “a great sob” and “slid into malaise.” After that he turned to his sister Ruth who by that time had “healed” herself.

One day in the, autumn of 1966, Jimmy and Ruth drove from Plains to Webster County and went for a walk in the

pinewoods. Ruth “shared with Jimmy” her experiences her “awareness of Christ” and told him “how it was to come to a place of total commitment, the peace and joy and the power it brings.” She also told him that “submission to Christ” meant being willing “to give up even the very best things in your life.” She asked whether he would give up his family and his business for Christ, and Jimmy readily said yes. But when Ruth asked whether he would also give up politics, Jimmy was “hesitant.” If that is what he had to give up, he said, he would “never find peace.” Jimmy at this point “became very emotional and cried.” Then he said, “I want the fullness of Christ in my life more than I want anything... I would really rather have the fullness of Christ in my life than be President.” At that time, Ruth did not suspect that Jimmy’s ambition might go so far, and she paid no attention to his remark. She advised her brother that in order to heal himself, he should heal others. As Ruth put it, Jimmy “went off and did lay missionary work for about a year.

During that year, Carter was “born again.” Exactly when the miracle occurred remains a mystery. Some day in May 1967, he was assigned the responsibility along with another person, Mio Pennington from Texas, to explain the faith to about a hundred families of non-believers in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, and to “seek their conversion.” Carter wrote that Milo Pennington, who “happens to be a peanut farmer,” and who “was not well-educated. did the most work and talking.” Pennington was then about 70.

It seemed to me he was the most inept person I had ever known in expressing himself. He fumbled and didn’t know what to say and I thought, ‘Oh, I could do much better....

Yet what happened, in Carter’s eyes, was a miracle: Milo Pennington succeeded in converting fifteen to twenty families- during a single week! “The whole week was almost a miracle to me and I felt the sense of presence of

God's influence in my life." Carter suddenly knew he could convert people more efficiently than Pennington. When that miraculous week ended, he called Rosalynn on the phone. "Jimmy, you don't sound like the same person. You sound like you are intoxicated." she said. Jimmy agreed: "Well, in a way I am." He was intoxicated with "a new sense of release and assurance and peace with myself." "From then on, "Jimmy Carter acted all the time like he was on the mountaintop for the Lord," said Pennington.

For nine months, from his September primary defeat until his "born again" experience, Carter had been struggling against utter despair. Then, in little Lock Haven, nestled against Bold Eagle Mountain, he was suddenly catapulted onto the "mountain-top for the Lord." A nine-month period of "horrible" torment preceded 'his born again conversion which produced a "sense of assurance and peace" in the embrace of the Heavenly Father.

Carter said, "When we accept Jesus as our Savior, it's a new life. That's what 'born again' means." I found out that among Baptists to be "born again" is "to impose control over such passions as anger, lust, pride, and fear." And, indeed, Carter apparently recognized his "shortcomings and sinfulness" and overcame his "pride" together with his tendency to be "always thinking about myself" and "using people." Since Carter acknowledged that his conversion was preceded by a "psychological problem," I thought that a further explanation might be found in the domain of psychiatry. Eric H. Erikson in his pioneering work *Young Man Luther*, has pointed out that "a deep nostalgia for an infantile trust," as well as lasting "violent doubts" about "a dangerous father," are underlying factors in a "conversion" experience which stands "on the borderline of the psychological and the theological." Ernest Jones was also most illuminating. He has written that "rebirth fantasies are particularly constant features" among "God-complex" types. This attracted my attention because of Carter's often-repeated references to God during the 1976 campaign. Although Carter insisted that he did not have "visions or hear voices or converse with God," he said

nevertheless that God “wants me to be the best politician I can possibly be.” He also said, “When I have a sense of peace and self-assurance that what I am doing is the right thing, I assume, maybe in an unwarranted way, that that’s doing God’s will.” Carter’s self-assurance that God, communicates to him His will appeared to me to be very similar to what Jones described as a manifestation of a “God-complex

We find even minor prophets and preachers speaking in the name of God with an authority so astounding as to preclude the idea of its arising solely in learning; in other words, one feels sure that their conscious attitude is generally the product of an unconscious fantasy in which they identify their personality with that of God... such a megalomaniac fantasy would be barely comprehensible did we not know how closely the ideas of God and Father are associated, so much so that from a purely psychological point of view they may be regarded as a magnified, idealized, and projected form of the idea of Father.

The transition from obedience to identification with God “is often, a rapid one, and in the unconscious, the two terms are practically synonymous.” In Carter’s born again miracle the transition was a rapid one.

Such fantasies are not at all rare, and “possibly occur here and there in all people.” There is, however, wrote Jones, a class of man with whom it is much stronger than usual, so that it “forms a constant and integral part of their unconscious.” Such an unusually strong identification with God does not of itself amount to insanity.

In a state of sanity, that is to say when the feeling for reality and the normal inhibitions of consciousness are operative, the fantasy can express itself only after passage through this censorship, and therefore only in a modified, weakened, and indirect form.

When men with a “god-complex” become insane,

They are apt to express openly the delusion that they actually are God, and instances of the kind are to be met in every asylum.

“I am careful about what I say,” said Carter, complaining that some reporters “try to trick me into saying something crazy.” Nevertheless Carter believed that he was “doing God’s will.” Norman Mailer said that Carter had been “illuminated with a mission,” but Senator John Tower put it more bluntly, saying that Carter had a “Messiah complex.” Harriet Van Home called him a “God-driven President.” Others have mentioned his “missionary zeal.” He was also described as “aloof, even princely,” and as “not sure he is a human being.”

I found Jones’s description of God-complex traits strikingly similar to those of Carter. Jones mentioned a “tendency to aloofness” as the most characteristic trait. The other, typical manifestations were the omnipotence fantasy, as well as omniscience, which “may be regarded as simply a form of omnipotence~ for whoever can do everything can also know everything.” The foundation of the God-complex is colossal narcissism that gives rise to an exhibitionistic tendency, one of the most primitive in the life of an individual. Closely related to this is the tendency to surround oneself with a cloud of mystery. These peculiarities strongly manifest themselves in Carter, as the endless references to him as an “enigma,” “puzzle,” and so on, suggest. According to opinion polls before the 1976 election, Carter was perceived as liberal by about 45% of the electorate and as conservative by 35%. A year later the figures were reversed.

Carter’s rebirth fantasy seems to gratify his striving for immortality. Since he is not a great scientist, writer or artist he must strive to immortalize himself through the great achievements or monumental disasters of his presidency. One of the great things he promised to do was to “heal” the

nation's wounds after the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate. The country was striving to "heal" and "cleanse" itself from the "shame" of these two disasters, as the public statements, editorials, numerous publications and Carter's own pronouncements suggested at the time. One of the three epigraphs in Carter's autobiography reads:

Hey, hey, Woody Guthrie, I wrote you a song,
'bout funny ol' world that's a-commin' along.
Seems sick an' it's hungry, it's tired and it's torn,
It looks like it's a dyin' an' it's hardly been born.
Bob Dylan

This epigraph points to Carter's identification with the country which "seems sick, an' it's hungry, it's tired and it's torn." And although "it looks like it's a-dying'," actually it is being born again in much the same way as happened to Jimmy. Carter is touched by images only if he personally can identify with them. His favorite song, for instance, is "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me—I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see."

In his autobiography Carter wrote that on September 5, 1974, he visited Carpenter Hall in Philadelphia, sat in the chair of one of the founding fathers, and "thought soberly about their times two centuries ago and ours of the 1970s. Their people were also discouraged, disillusioned, and confused. But these leaders acted with purpose and conviction." 213 million Americans were eager, wrote Carter, "to restore to our country what has been lost." These thoughts occurred to Carter less than a month after Nixon's resignation. Carter felt he could fill the place and fit in what was lost. Somewhere he was convinced that the personal traumas leading to his born-again experience in their emotional content were similar or identical to that of the country, which was also longing for rebirth. This sensation was at the root of his claim to be the embodiment

of the national will and to be a shepherd who would lead us along the road to salvation he had recently traveled himself. Carter mistook his problems for those of the nation. He thought, perhaps sincerely, that by being born-again he solved his personal traumas and could perform the same miracle for the nation. The problem was that his rebirth fantasy did not change the inner core of his personality. And by identifying his own traumas with those of the nation he was projecting on the nation and the world his inner unresolved conflicts. This type of projection could not but lead to a perpetuation and magnification of national and world strife.

