H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Skidmore. *Reversing Course: Carter's Foreign Policy and the Failure of Reform.* Nashville, Tenn.: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996. xxii + 234 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8265-1273-4.

Reviewed by Joe Rich (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology)
Published on H-PCAACA (May, 1996)

The Carter Administration and Soviet Affairs

The explanation at the core of this book–of Jimmy Carter's abandonment of his initial preference for conciliating the Soviet Union in favor of a more traditional policy of hard-line confrontation–is a model of cogent, tightly crafted reasoning. Denying that either strategy was actuated primarily by moral idealism or was an incoherent outcome of political inexperience or of conflict within the administration, the author contends that the reversal reflected a fundamental paradigm shift for which currently prevailing explanatory theories fail satisfactorily to account. In particular, he takes issue with dominant realist theory–accepting its interpretation of Carter's early liberal reformism as an adjustment to America's relative decline in global power but rejecting its contention that the president's subsequent change of tune was due to his realization that the international environment was more threatening than he had previously believed. The real reason for the change, maintains David Skidmore, was the government's failure to counter rising *domestic* opposition, fostered by elite groups with vested interests in the Cold War. Carter's original policy, he argues, was too complex, flexible, and pragmatic to lend itself to the kind of simplistic legitimating propaganda to which Americans were accustomed.

Exhibiting a wide-ranging, rigorous scholarship, Skidmore acknowledges the contributions of existing literature in, for example, tracing the modifications undergone by public opinion during the Carter period. And he painstakingly sifts, analyzes, and evaluates a varied array of empirical sources to validate his view of the administration's motives, scrupulously qualifying his conclusions to remain within the bounds of permissible inference. His demonstration that many external factors, such as Soviet willingness to discuss arms control and limit military spending, were more compatible with Carter's earlier than his later policy, is also generally convincing.

The one glaring exception is his claim that the USSR took no advantage of the president's forebearance to make significant gains at American expense in the Third World. To do justice to the tortuous intricacies of big power rivalry in trouble spots as radically disparate as Nicaragua, Angola, Cambodia, and Yemen demands considerably more space than is allocated here. Some extra room could no doubt have been made available for this purpose had the exposition been rather less repetitive–although I found the author's frequent reminders of the main contours of his complex argument neither tedious nor irritating and they certainly enhanced its transparency. What might more justifiably have been omitted is the chapter on Carter's three immediate successors in office. Its main purpose is to establish the broad applicability of the explanatory theory that Skidmore extrapolates from the events of the Carter period–namely, that hegemonic nations with open, democratic, decentralized political systems are slower than countries with more modest military and economic capability abroad and stronger centralized government at home to adjust to shifts in the international power balance. However, the heuristic potential of this (on the face of it, eminently plausible) hypothesis gets little support from such a necessarily sketchy treatment of the policies of the last three presidents.

This review is copyrighted (c) 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations. It may be reproduced electronically for educational or scholarly use. The Associations reserve print rights and permissions. (Contact: P.C.Rollins at the following electronic address: Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Joe Rich. Review of Skidmore, David, *Reversing Course: Carter's Foreign Policy and the Failure of Reform.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. May, 1996.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=434

Copyright © 1996 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.