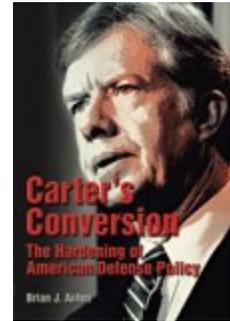


Brian J. Auten. *Carter's Conversion: The Hardening of American Defense Policy*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008. xiv + 344 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8262-1816-2.

Reviewed by John Dumbrell (Durham University)

Published on H-Diplo (June, 2009)

Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball



## Converting Carter

Most commentators on the presidency of Jimmy Carter see his international policy as falling into two distinct periods: the early phase, dominated by the human rights initiatives and by efforts to combine a general acceptance of detente with a distancing from Henry Kissinger's realist/globalist version of world order; and a second phase of more orthodox anticommunist containment, exemplified by Washington's reaction to the Iranian revolution and to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Conventional views put considerable emphasis on what Brian J. Auten calls "*innenpolitik*" (p. 2). These domestic factors include bureaucratic politics—primarily the growing strength of national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, the relative eclipse of Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and the exit from the administration of United Nations ambassador Andrew Young—the growing conservative critique of detente from the right wing of the Democratic Party as well as from the Committee on the Present Danger, and associated electoral pressures.

In *Carter's Conversion*, Auten launches a direct assault on this *innenpolitik* explanatory consensus. He accepts that there was a major shift in the Carter administration's view of the world, but attributes it primarily to the working out of the logic of neoclassical realism, a theoretical tradition that "highlights the role played by statesmen or central decision-makers" in assessing global shifts in relative material power (p. 33). Ultimately, decision makers, though they are *influenced* by domestic pressures, undertake adjustments to global power transformation. What

Gideon Rose calls "relative material power capabilities" always, in the final analysis, is "the first driver of grand strategy, foreign policy, and defense policy" (p. 31).[1] Thus, Carter is seen as finally awakening to the burgeoning nature of the Soviet threat—something that had been obscured by the image of the Vietnam War and by the politics of detente. Carter's prepresidential strategic thought is dealt with incisively, if somewhat narrowly, in chapter 3. Auten emphasizes the impact of Carter's concern for governmental efficiency and defense-budget waste elimination as well as his espousal of complex world-order ideas via his association with the Trilateral Commission.

Auten's thesis draws on his impressive expertise in defense issues. The heart of this book is an extremely scholarly and detailed account of Carter's defense budgeting, his administration's growing commitment to the MX missile, to "countervailing" nuclear strategies, to shifts in American strategic policy for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and so on (p. 286). Auten offers detailed exposition of the administration's developing assessment of the Soviet threat and of Soviet strategic thinking, particularly in 1978-79. The new assessments were not confined to the Pentagon. By the later part of 1978, Brzezinski was drawing on "countervailing" ideas advanced by Fritz Ermath, a RAND specialist who had joined the national security adviser's staff in the early part of that year.

Auten's analysis bears some similarity to that offered

by Richard Thornton, who argues that the trajectory of the Carter administration is explicable in terms of its fear of enhanced Soviet missile guidance capability.[2] Auten holds, however, that Thornton “overstates his case,” especially in the claim that the administration was actually back-footed in its very first week in office by intelligence concerning Soviet guidance capability (p. 27). Auten lays great stress on timing. For Thornton to be correct, argues Auten, policy transformation would have had to come much earlier. Similarly, Auten invokes timing to counter the common-sense view that the policy shift was caused by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and other “shocks” of 1979: “the grand strategic and defense policy decisions that collectively represent Carter’s conversion ... were all initiated well before the Soviet move into Afghanistan” (p. 25).

Auten’s analysis is intellectually strong, but, like Thornton’s, it also is oversold. Virtually all commentators on the Carter presidency—even those, like myself, who offer a defense of Carter as a human rights president—acknowledge that the administration eventually embraced nuclear war-fighting strategies, primarily in response to technological change. The idea of Carter as a “soft” president was a product of Reaganite and neoconservative polemic, and to some degree of Carter’s post-presidential conduct, rather than of any objective analysis. There were *always* “hard” and “soft” threads within the administration’s thinking. Auten seeks to deflate Thornton’s thesis by noting that early defense cuts were made despite apparent evidence of enhanced Soviet nuclear capability, before a clear assessment of the danger had been effected. But Auten also shows how “hard” positions—such as Brzezinski’s interest in new versions of Soviet targeting—were there from the beginning. Auten acknowledges that Carter, during the 1976 election campaign, expressed considerable concern about the increase in Soviet naval capability. In fact, Carter’s criticism of the Ford-Kissinger foreign policy during the 1976 election campaign reflected both “soft” and “hard” foreign

policy positions.

Is not the simple truth somehow as follows? The Carter administration came into office determined to offer an alternative to the Kissinger approach, appreciating the force of both leftist and rightist critiques of detente. The key policy of the early years was that of global human rights, designed precisely to respond to such criticisms, and also to unite the Henry Jackson and Tom Harkin wings of the Democratic Party. The human rights policy broke down, though was never entirely extinguished, through its own internal contradictions, especially toward Iran. The first phase of Carter’s foreign and defense policies was also undermined by evidence of Soviet nuclear capability and Soviet adventurism (in places such as Yemen, well before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan). Policy development was also intimately bound up with internal bureaucratic politics (primarily the Vance-Brzezinski rivalry), and with the failure of the human rights policy to resolve the various domestic pressures on detente. Running alongside all this was Carter’s darkening attitude toward Soviet power—not only associated with nuclear and general defense intelligence, but also with his growing horror at Moscow’s intransigence over the treatment of dissidents. Defense policy was inextricably bound up with foreign policy, and both were mediated through elite perception, domestic pressure, and bureaucratic politics.

*Carter’s Conversion* will take a deserved place among the very best academic work on American defense policy in the 1970s. It is, however, a very fine piece of specialist scholarship, rather than a completely convincing, historically based reinterpretation of the Carter presidency.

#### Notes

[1]. Gideon Rose, “Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” *World Politics* 51 (1998): 146.

[2]. Richard Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order* (New York: Paragon House, 1991).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** John Dumbrell. Review of Auten, Brian J., *Carter’s Conversion: The Hardening of American Defense Policy*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24296>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.