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Mr. Carter's Inheritance

A presidential election represents an opportunity for a new beginning, a time for the people to unite behind their chosen leader. It is appropriate that this should be true; the well-being of all citizens is dependent on how effectively the new leader is able to function.

The presidency carries with it power and an aura of power. When Mr. Carter has taken office, he will have both and they can serve him and the country well. As long as the President is in office, much of the power remains. However, a few missteps can leave his prestige in shambles.

Mr. Carter has much going for him. He is, by all accounts, unusually intelligent. His political party has overwhelming control of both houses of Congress. Mr. Carter has the opportunity to be effective, moving the country toward coping with many great problems. However, in making a new beginning in Washington, he will find his maneuvering room limited. In part this is his own doing, but in part he inherits liabilities incurred by the Administration during the last 8 years. Mr. Nixon left office after he created a rancorous conflict between the White House and Capitol Hill, alienated top civil servants, and made it fashionable for the media to denigrate the presidency. In his limited tenure, Mr. Ford did much to restore the office, but of political necessity and conviction he continued the practice of confrontations with Congress, though on a more civil basis. The media continued to be hostile. Their habits of 8 years are likely to persist.

During the primaries, Mr. Carter ran against Washington. But the majority of the congressmen who have made the laws are Democrats. Moreover, although a limited number of top appointees have been Republicans, the administration of the government has been planned and carried out by civil servants, the majority of whom are Democrats. If he is to avoid an alienation of Congress and the bureaucrats, Mr. Carter must communicate more constructively with these groups than did his predecessors.

Most congressmen are relaxed about what they term campaign rhetoric, so being against Washington is no big deal to them. However, they are aware of the nuances of power, of their own worth, and of their power base. As vote-getters in their respective states, most Democratic congressmen outpolled Mr. Carter. Thus politically they owe him nothing. What is more serious, during the campaign he and his staff were relatively inaccessible to some important congressmen. Mr. Carter has created potential animosities on Capitol Hill in his own party, and he has made a start toward perpetuating Capitol Hill-White House confrontations.

If these habits of 8 years continue, Congress has at its disposal sizable assets. At one time the presidency had a lopsided advantage over what was often a rubber-stamp Congress. Administrations enjoyed a monopoly on expertise in matters outside the knowledge of legislators. However, many of the veteran lawmakers are very knowledgeable in the areas of their respective committees. Moreover, they have new resources.

Following World War II, Congress took measures to improve the breadth of its staff. This movement accelerated after Mr. Nixon took office. Today Congress has ready access to experts in a wide variety of fields. Each congressman has his own staff, and each committee has a staff. Beyond that, there are experts at the Library of Congress and the General Accounting Office. In matters involving science and technology (and that includes practically everything), Congress has the backup of the Office of Technology Assessment headed by Emilio Q. Daddario. Mr. Daddario has assembled a good staff which he supplements by contracted studies and by advisory committees. He now taps for the benefit of Congress a group as powerful intellectually as that of the Kennedy regime.

During the next 4 years Congress will have an important role in shaping the conduct of government. If Mr. Carter is not to be out-brained, he will need to assemble a first-class team of advisers, and he will need to have the loyal support of the top civil servants.—PHILIP H. ABELSON