AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM

VOLUME I: STRUCTURES OF GOVERNMENT

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Supplementary Material

Chapter 9: Liberalism Divided – Introduction

*Jimmy Carter*, **Inaugural Address** (1977)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jimmy Carter was a dark-horse candidate in 1976. A little- known, post–civil rights governor from Georgia, Carter offered himself as an outsider to both business-as-usual DC politics and to the national Democratic Party. His message often emphasized both personal and national reform and ­renewal. The message was symbolized by his walking to the White House after delivering his inaugural address. It was reflected less successfully in his “malaise” speech near the end of his term, where he dwelled on the “crisis of the American spirit . . . all around us.” In 1980 he was challenged unsuccessfully for the Democratic nomination for president by the more orthodox liberal Senator Edward Kennedy; he was defeated in the general elections by conservative Republican Ronald Reagan.

. . . .

Let our recent mistakes bring a resurgent commitment to the basic principles of our Nation, for we know that if we despise our own government we have no future. We recall in special times when we have stood briefly, but magnificently, united. In those times no prize was beyond our grasp.

But we cannot dwell upon remembered glory. We cannot afford to drift. We reject the prospect of failure or mediocrity or an inferior quality of life for any person. Our Government must at the same time be both competent and compassionate.

We have already found a high degree of personal liberty, and we are now struggling to enhance equality of opportunity. Our commitment to human rights must be absolute, our laws fair, our natural beauty preserved; the powerful must not persecute the weak, and human dignity must be enhanced.

We have learned that “more” is not necessarily “better,” that even our great Nation has its recognized limits, and that we can neither answer all questions nor solve all problems. We cannot afford to do everything, nor can we afford to lack boldness as we meet the future. So, together, in a spirit of individual sacrifice for the common good, we must simply do our best.

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1. Excerpt taken from Jimmy Carter, Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1977), 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)