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Frustrated by Fading Frontiers - The 1979 Levittown Gas Riots

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Abstract

This article examines the Levittown riots of June 1979 within the context of that year's energy crisis within the US. By bringing together elements of diplomatic and cultural history analysis the article attempts to show that the riots were a reaction to Jimmy Carter's energy conservation efforts and marked something of a turning point in US energy policy. Prior to the riots Carter had focused on energy as a domestically-based issue and promoted conservation as a means to avoid future shortages. However, with the advent of severe shortages due to the Iranian Revolution and a lack of patience regarding conservation on behalf of the rioters, and the population as a whole, Carter moved to place energy within the realm of national security and a harder foreign policy.

Keywords: Energy; US foreign policy; Jimmy Carter; Iran; Levittown Riots

Introduction

On June 24 1979, a couch and a mattress were moved into the centre of a busy intersection in a sleepy suburban area in Pennsylvania as local youths cheered. Twenty-five trucks had earlier attempted to block the intersection in protest at rising diesel prices (AP, UPI Wires, 1979). The energy crisis of 1979 was beginning to take its toll. The gas stations on the intersection were nervous; many of them later being attacked for not having enough gasoline as the ripple effect of the Iranian

Revolution, and the associated cutting of Iranian oil exports, continued to affect the US energy supply situation. This was the Levittown Gas Riot of the weekend of June 24 1979, an occasion that represented a seminal moment in the history of the energy crisis. No longer willing to bear high energy prices and no longer willing to depend on energy conservation as a means by which to bring US energy usage under control, the riots in Levittown signified something of a societal shift. Frustrated by fading frontiers people were tired of conservation and the implication that America had reached its epoch. The riots were a societal mirror of Washington's foreign policy shift - weary of the soft approach of conservation the demand was to shift towards the harder reality of energy security through foreign and military policy such as that encapsulated by the Carter Doctrine, issued six months later.

Methodology

The article, based on a paper given at the 2013 Critical Social Thinking conference in UCC, attempts to bring together aspects of cultural history and public consciousness with diplomatic history analysis. The primary methodologies used in constructing this article have been a mixture of traditional, archival based, diplomatic historical research along with cultural history as read through the newspapers, both local and national, of the time.

The Carter Doctrine and earlier Conservation

On January 23 1980, six months after the riots in Levittown, President Jimmy Carter issued his State of the Union address to the US Congress. He stated '...An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force' (Carter, 1980). The vital interest referred to was, of course, oil. Having 'lost' Iran through the Iranian Revolution and with a perceived growing Soviet interest in the Gulf region Carter took up the baton of military might in order to promote US energy security. This was quite a turn-around from Carter's stance on energy even a couple of years previously.

In January 1977 as Carter settled into the White House the US was facing a natural gas shortage due, acutely, to archaic laws regarding the transfer of gas across state lines, and more broadly, to issues of consumption. The US was simply consuming

too much oil and gas, half of which had to be imported from areas such as the Middle East. Ultimately this made the US weak and Carter, during his 1976 election campaign explained that such dependency meant that the US could never be free to act independently on the world stage (Ford, 1976). Explaining how he proposed to fix the natural gas crisis, Carter took to the airwaves in a cardigan, espousing the benefits of energy conservation and of finding new ways to use US energy resources such as coal (Carter 1977). Less than 90 days after this Carter was back on the television to showcase his National Energy Plan, an American first, which proposed various measures, centred on conservation, which would help wean the US off of its dependence on foreign oil (Carter, 1977).

A Strong Weakness?

By proposing conservation Carter was backing a horse that most liked to watch but few liked to back. Americans were not used to being told that they had to cut-down on their consumption of anything for consumption, in general, was the marker of a better life. This was exactly the theory on which suburbs such as Levittown had been built, a theory which, in the age of ‘foreign oil controlling American soil’, to quote a Bob Dylan song from the time (Mattson, 2010), was proven to be completely flawed. In the 1950s as a broader middle-class developed, the suburbs sprung up, commuting distances lengthened and oil consumption rose. In a new world of high oil prices the consumption mantra was challenged, questioning the whole idea of American progress. Because much of the energy Americans consumed was imported the former ideal of progress had been turned on its head. Now consumption was weakening the US because considerations regarding oil imports had to be factored into various foreign policy decisions which weakened Washington’s ability to act independently on the world stage free of these material considerations. Carter’s National Energy Plan and general promotion of conservation and alternative energy technologies were attempts at changing this by reducing energy consumption and doing more with less. In doing so the US would no longer have to import as much oil from unstable parts of the world such as the Middle East which required a strong US military/geostrategic tilt in order to ensure a continuous flow of oil. Neither would economic inflation eat into the value of the dollar and balloon the national deficit due to rising foreign oil costs. Acknowledged by Carter in his April 1977 National Energy Plan speech as a road paved with ‘modest sacrifice’ (Carter, 1977), the idea

of conservation, while not involving the strong-arming of oil-rich nations, was one that would make the US stronger and more independent in the long run.

Conservation and Crisis

Despite Carter's initial moves and rhetoric surrounding the idea of conservation he was far from idealistic and instead bordered on the pragmatic. Iran, the second most important oil producer within OPEC and a key US ally in the Middle East, was still treated with the same level of respect that previous President's had shown it with Gerald Ford accusing Carter of misunderstanding the importance of arms sales to Iran in the context of its geographical position south of the Soviet Union, east of an unfriendly Iraq and lying atop massive oil reserves, much of which was exported to the US (Ford, 1977). Despite Ford's accusation when Carter became President the same level of priority was given it in arms purchases as had been done with previous President's not as focused on conservation. Indeed Carter's promotion of human rights through his foreign policy was something not stringently applied to Iran for obvious strategic reasons. This was shown in the arms sales that were allowed to proceed with Iran in Carter's first year in the White House and in to 1978. Despite the continued American support for Iran however, the nation, which had undergone a massive process of modernisation through the 1970s, erupted in revolution as 1978 came to an end. Perhaps the most strategic element of the Iranian economy, the oil-fields, were closed down by oil workers on a general strike. World oil supplies, already quite tight by the end of 1978, became tighter still (Yergin, 1991). Carter's efforts at promoting conservation were now to be put to the test as spot shortages of gasoline and rapidly rising prices spread through much of the US in the spring of '79.

In a sense Carter had tried to sit on both sides of the fence; he had attempted to promote the idea of conservation and the making of a stronger, more independent America through greater self-restraint and self-reliance. On the other side of the fence Carter had tried to cultivate good relations with Iran through arms sales and the promotion of US geostrategic strength in the region, and thus have some influence over oil prices within OPEC. By April of 1979 however Carter was back on the airwaves stating that America's 'growing dependence (on foreign oil) has left us dangerously exposed to sudden price rises and interruptions in supply' (Carter, 1979). He explained to the American people that the gasoline shortages and price

rises they were seeing every day, direct consequences of the Iranian Revolution and associated OPEC price rises, were reality and would be a fact of life if Americans could not bring themselves to seriously conserve energy (Carter, 1979). Ultimately the relationship between Iran and the US had been a case study of US weakness for in maintaining such a close friendship with the Persian Gulf state the US was simply securing the worldwide flow of oil both to itself and other Western allies as Carter himself uttered in that same April address when he stated that, ‘Our national strength is dangerously dependent on a thin line of oil tankers stretching half-way around the Earth, originating in the Middle East and around the Persian Gulf, one of the most unstable regions in the world’ (Carter, 1979). This strength came in the form of strong military backing for the Shah of Iran, the ruler who was so praised in the West but who, ultimately, Iranians wanted to overthrow. In backing the Shah the US kept itself under the illusion that if it could stabilise oil prices through its influence on him then US moves to dampen oil consumption at home would no longer have to be taken as seriously. Indeed in November 1977 Carter had impressed upon the Shah his desire to see Iran use its influence within OPEC to force a price freeze for 1978. The Shah, wary of Carter’s human rights crusade and afraid it would disturb the US-Iran relationship, acquiesced (Sick, 1985). While the price freeze was temporary the end result was an America more beholden to the Middle East than ever before and thus weaker and less independent than it touted itself as being within the Cold War framework. This made Carter’s calls for further conservation in his April 5th speech all the more prescient.

Levittown and the End of Patience

While Carter’s calls for conservation were, on some levels, quite popular, when it actually came to the action of individually saving energy people were less enamoured with Carter writing in his Presidential memoirs that it was ‘like pulling teeth to convince the people of America that we had a serious problem (and) that they should be willing to make some sacrifices’ (Carter, 1982). In a sense the idea of a simpler America was romantic for many but ultimately the consumption mantra was hard to detach oneself from. Being a global superpower the US had trumpeted itself as a nation built on free enterprise and the concept of the American Dream where people could strike out across the frontier, expand their lands and thus expand their consumption in order to achieve that American Dream, a thesis first proposed in

detail by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893. The idea of conservation was an admittance of limits, something Carter had done in his Inaugural Address in January 1977 when he stated that ‘we have learned that “more” is not necessarily “better”, that even our great nation has its recognised limits’ (Carter, 1977). This was an admittance that was applauded in those days after the scandals of Vietnam and Watergate but now, in the summer of ‘79, derided as soft and unbecoming of a superpower. The irony here, of course, was that by admitting to its limits the US could become a stronger nation through greater self-sufficiency which was a trait that echoed the old frontier days. Still, this did not fit well with the consumption mantra, the two days of riots in Levittown marking this in a dramatic fashion.

The riots had begun when truckers, on strike over rising fuel prices and the lack of protection offered to them by federal regulations, blocked the Five-Points Intersection. About 25 trucks were involved but the incident quickly escalated as a melee involving about 2000 people erupted after police attempted to move a parked truck from the centre of the intersection (Associated Press, 1979). Supporters of the truckers began to pelt the police with beer cans as they attempted to control fights that had broken out while the truck was moved. The next day it became worse as the gasoline stations were attacked, cars were torched in the middle of the intersection and fire-fighters abused as they tried to stop the flames from reaching ever higher. Social order had completely broken down in an area considered a birthplace of American middle-class suburbia. Support for the striking truckers had turned into a general statement about the energy crisis and how Carter was dealing with it.

That June weekend had indeed signified a societal shift. The patience that conservation required, indeed that diplomacy with the likes of Iran and Saudi Arabia required, had run out amongst those rioting in Levittown. The very processes by which Carter had hoped to strengthen the US were being earmarked by the rioters as weaknesses. For example a local newspaper stated that ‘meanwhile, our President looks inscrutable as he goes about his sightseeing and partying in Japan’, a reference to Carter’s trip to the Tokyo Economic Summit which was meeting to discuss how the Western nations could better manage the oil shortage, amongst other items. The newspaper’s disregard for the diplomatic initiatives involved was a further sign that patience for such diplomacy had worn to the point where the social fabric had now

tearing apart. However, it was just this sort of diplomacy that was required in order to show the rest of the Western world that the US was serious about energy conservation. Parallel to this US conservation was also something that would help fight inflation, at the time ravaging the US dollar and the purchasing power of the rioters. The problem was that this was all abstract and the only visible results were still-rising gasoline prices and inflation hitting double-digits (Stein, 2010). Carter returned from Japan to see the situation growing worse by the day throughout the US and on July 15 he made his famous 'Crisis of Confidence' speech in which he asked Americans to band together so that 'on the battlefield of energy we can win for our nation a new confidence, and we can seize control again of our common destiny' (Carter, 1979). The speech gave him a rise in the polls (Mattson, 2010) but still the shadow of Levittown hung over Washington - a quicker solution was needed to the energy crisis, one that pinned energy directly to notions of national security.

The re-militarisation of Energy

It can be argued that Carter attempted to move the issue of energy from the realm of foreign policy into the realm of domestic policy by his attempts at managing the issue through conservation and through a National Energy Plan. While I do not believe Carter's stance on this was ever as clear cut as that, it is clear that as 1979 turned to 1980 energy became a factor within Carter's pronouncements on national security. Conservation was not as front and centre as it had been, the riots in Levittown showing that the American public were tired of the idea and wanted a return to the days of cheap energy. Alongside this the public were weary of the implication that, without an engagement in conservation, they were part of the broader energy problem. As such the issue of energy would now be firmly rooted in the realm of foreign affairs where material sacrifices by average American people would not have to be demanded. Months before the Levittown riots the Secretary of Energy and the Secretary of Defence had issued a warning to Moscow that oil in the Middle East was a 'vital national interest' to the US, implying that military means would be employed to defend it (Sentinel Wire Services, 1979). It seemed that while Washington could not lessen the price of the oil, it could at least secure it militarily.

By the end of 1979 Carter himself equated energy security and national security, saying that there was 'no way to separate the two' (Carter, 1980). In these terms then

conservation was a matter of national security but at this time Carter meant national security within the overall Cold War framework, pointing a warning finger directly at Moscow. This theme had its primary airing on January 21 1980 when Carter issued his State of the Union Address to Congress just days after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He warned the Soviets against moving towards the Persian Gulf and the oil fields of the Middle East and he meant it. However it was also to placate US ally Saudi Arabia, fearful of a Soviet encroachment made all the easier by the Iran-Iraq War which had recently gotten underway. The warning had substance with Carter moving to create the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, a military force composed of units from all services which could move to the Middle East in hours to secure oil fields. How militarily feasible the force would have been against a Soviet invasion is questionable but the point lays beside this - the position of conservation and alternative energy had been shifted far from the spotlight and in its place was the use of military force to protect energy resources far from US shores.

Conclusion - A Weak Strength?

The Levittown Riots represented a frustration at fading frontiers. The baby-boom generation who had grown up with cheap energy almost as a birthright now had to queue for hours to fill their cars, if they could find a gas station open. The consumption mantra and the frontier thesis shared an idea that 'more' would always be available and that the measure of progress was based on material consumption. More cheap energy could not be garnered within the US again though for its giant oil fields had run dry at the beginning of the 1970s removing Washington's buffer against upsets to the world oil market, thus its reliance on Middle East oil after this period. Even if that imported oil could be kept cheap it showed up an American weakness which Carter himself had pointed out in his election campaign in 1976 - it tied the US to the fate of the Middle East and to the whims of OPEC and in doing so it constrained US independence. Carter's military build-up towards the end of his Presidency and his concentration on the Middle East region in order to secure the oil reserves through the Carter Doctrine were tangible signs of an America that was no longer afraid of the legacy of Vietnam and was willing to 'do something' while keeping US energy consumers blameless. Moving energy into the realm of foreign policy automatically removed the average American from blame as the idea of conservation fell by the wayside. Indeed it gave average Americans something solid

to be patriotic about but in shifting the issue of energy from the domestic realm to the foreign policy realm the US was actually losing control of its own destiny.

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