

CHAPTER 4

IN-DEPTH DISCUSSIONS WITH CARTER

In late June 1976, Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter distinguished himself in the eyes of CIA officials by becoming the first presidential hopeful to request intelligence briefings even before receiving his party's nomination. Carter's request, which was directed to President Ford, prompted discussions involving the president, CIA Director George Bush, and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft about who should provide such briefings and when they should be made available to the candidate. Bush recommended to Ford that as a first step he, Bush, should meet with Carter to discuss the ground rules and arrange for follow-on briefings, which would be delivered by intelligence professionals. The ever-cautious Scowcroft recommended instead that all briefings should be given by the DCI, accompanied and supported by the appropriate national intelligence officers (NIOs), who were the Intelligence Community's senior substantive experts.

These deliberations resulted in a decision by Ford that Bush should meet with Carter to discuss the parameters and arrangements for the provision of intelligence support. Such a session could be arranged before the nomination. Following the nomination, NIOs would provide Carter in-depth intelligence briefings. The president insisted that the DCI chair the sessions even though he would not necessarily be obliged to give the briefings himself.

Pursuant to the president's instructions, Bush contacted Carter to arrange a meeting. The two met on 5 July in Hershey, Pennsylvania, where Carter was attending a meeting of Democratic governors. In the course of the meeting, the director informed Carter that the president had asked him to preside over the briefings that would follow. Bush introduced to Carter one senior Agency officer, Deputy to the DCI for National Intelligence Richard Lehman, noting that he would be the action officer in charge of preparing the briefings that would follow in Plains, Georgia. They would begin after the Democratic convention the next week. Carter, in turn, indicated that he would welcome detailed discussions of selected subjects such as Soviet strategic programs. He designated his "issues man," Stuart Eizenstat, to be his contact and proposed to receive briefings every week to 10 days.

Although the initial meeting was to have been limited to a discussion of the arrangements for future briefings, Lehman's account noted that the conversation "ranged over virtually the entire field of intelligence."¹ Carter was briefed on a number of current developments abroad and was shown a variety of intelligence materials and publications, including satellite photographs. Lehman reported that the governor asked a great many questions "ranging from the future of Rhodesia to morale in the Agency."

In thinking back to that pre-nomination meeting with the DCI in Pennsylvania, Carter remembered, "I was very honored to have President [then DCI] Bush come to brief me. President Ford offered every assistance. I hardly knew him and had never been in the Oval Office."²

In soliciting the CIA briefings, Carter was already displaying the interest in detail that was to be a mark of his presidency. The day following his meeting with Bush in Pennsylvania, Carter told newsmen that he would receive "a six-hour briefing" shortly after the Democratic nomination. On several subsequent occasions during the campaign, the governor expressed the hope that by being fully informed he could avoid committing himself to positions that might later embarrass him as a candidate or as president. Asked in 1993 about his motives in arranging what became a series of immensely time-consuming sessions, Carter replied, "I wanted the long briefings in Plains. I wanted particularly not to make any inadvertent mistake that would complicate things for President Ford on SALT or later for me." Just prior to the presidential debates, Carter remembers, "I wanted to know what was going on."

Extended Preelection Briefings

When the time came in late July to meet Carter in Plains, Agency officers discovered that the first challenge was to get there. CIA's director in 1976 normally used a Gulfstream aircraft for his travel within the United States. Plains had a 4,400-foot sod airstrip that was not suitable for Gulfstream operations. The manager of the airfield at Americus, Georgia, some 10 miles from Plains, informed the Agency aircrew that Gulfstream aircraft had occasionally used his 4,200-foot paved airstrip, but that they should be aware there was no kerosene fuel available at the facility. Moreover, the airfield at Americus had no control tower and, thus, was suitable for operation only in daylight hours. On discovering that the nearest all-weather facility with an instrument landing

¹ Richard Lehman, "Meeting with Governor Carter," memorandum for the record, 6 July 1976.

² Jimmy Carter, interview by the author in Atlanta, Georgia, 23 June 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent quotations from Carter come from this interview.

system was at Albany, some 45 miles from Plains, Agency officials sought help from the US military.

A few phone calls resulted in arrangements whereby Bush and his party would travel from Washington, DC, directly to Lawson Army Airfield at Fort Benning, Georgia. At Fort Benning, they were told, the director would be transferred to a US Army Bell helicopter for a 30-minute flight to Peterson Field at Plains. The Agency aircrew that normally flew the DCI was puzzled that the manuals made no mention of Peterson Field. Another call revealed that it was not exactly Peterson Field; rather, it was Peterson's field, Peterson being a farmer who owned land at the edge of Plains.

In the planning stages of the first visit, Lehman and Carter's press secretary, Jody Powell, agreed that they should minimize press attention to the director's visit. This was intended to reinforce the nonpolitical nature of the briefings, Powell having assured CIA that the governor wanted to avoid any appearance of taking political advantage of the Agency briefing. However, with the growing number of reporters in Plains desperate for news and with the expected helicopter arrival, it became obvious that the visit would not go unnoticed. The press was, therefore, informed of the time and place of the director's arrival. Bush talked briefly with reporters after disembarking from the helicopter, enabling the rest of the party to unload the briefing materials and travel the short distance to Carter's home. Despite the original intentions of the planners, Lehman remembers that the visit "could not possibly have been more conspicuous."³

The first CIA session was highly publicized for another reason as well—it was sandwiched into a week filled with other high-level briefings of the nominee. The Agency's presentation occurred on Wednesday, 28 July, preceded by a discussion of defense issues that lasted most of the day Monday, and a session with leading economists on Tuesday. Thursday was dedicated to a foreign policy presentation by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. Commenting on this series of briefings in 1993, Carter remembered especially "the value of Secretary Kissinger's whole day of briefings."

Carter himself drew added press attention to the Agency briefing by discussing it at some length with reporters the day before. On Tuesday the governor informed newsmen that he had asked the CIA "to brief him on confidential information concerning Lebanon and the Middle East, Rhodesia, South Africa, and South Korea, plus the interrelationships between the United States, the Soviet Union, and China."⁴ He piqued reporters' interest by volunteering that

³ Richard Lehman, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 10 March 1993. Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent comments are also from this interview.

he had not decided whether, if he were elected president, he would replace Bush as CIA director. The governor noted that Bush had previously been involved in Republican politics but added that he had “brought the CIA a good background as former UN ambassador and US representative to China.” Carter added his choice for CIA head would be a person “with stature with the American people, whose integrity was beyond doubt and with some analytic ability.”

CIA’s session with Carter began about 1:00 p.m. and continued without interruption for a full six hours, adjourning about 7:00 p.m.⁵ The session included a current intelligence review of world trouble spots: Lebanon, Iraqi-Syrian relations, strains between Egypt and Libya, the Taiwan Straits, Rhodesia, the Cuban presence in Angola, and developments in Uganda. These subjects were covered in approximately 30 minutes. The bulk of the afternoon was devoted to a discussion of Soviet strategic programs and the status of the SALT talks.

Bush made some brief introductory comments, but most of the briefing was delivered by two Agency experts in strategic systems, Howard Stoertz and Ray McCrory. The two provided a detailed description of Soviet forces for intercontinental nuclear attack and for nuclear attack on the Eurasian periphery. Their presentation focused also on Soviet strategic defense capabilities and US estimates of long-term prospects for the strategic balance. An ensuing discussion of SALT compliance issues was very detailed; it included a description of how monitoring was carried out and how the process worked within the US government for determining whether a violation had occurred. Participants from the Agency were surprised that the discussion of strategic issues went on so long that they were forced to jettison plans to discuss Soviet political developments, foreign policy, and the state of the Soviet economy.

Carter was a very careful and interested listener and an active participant. All who were present remember that he asked a great many questions, often in minute detail. He was especially interested in the nature of the Intelligence Community’s evidence, including satellite photography of deployed Soviet weapons. The governor asked detailed questions about the obligations of the USSR and the United States under the interim agreement and about the truth of the charges being made in the press that the Soviets were violating SALT I understandings.

Carter’s running mate, Senator Walter “Fritz” Mondale, also attended the briefing. He was especially interested in the role and knowledge of the Con-

⁴ Associated Press, 28 July 1976.

⁵ Richard Lehman, “First Briefing of Governor Carter,” memorandum for the record, 29 July 1976.

gress in arms control issues. He wanted to understand precisely whether the Soviets were justified in any of their charges that the United States had violated the SALT I agreement. Mondale also was well informed about and sensitive to the specific issue of whether Minuteman missile shelters constituted a violation of the interim agreement.

A different set of questions from Mondale caused the CIA director some concern because they raised sensitive policy issues. In some cases his queries related to ongoing CIA relationships with foreign liaison services or the Agency's operations. Lehman noted in a memorandum for the record some days after the July briefing that he had informed Carter aide Eizenstat that the DCI had been uncomfortable with some of Mondale's questions, particularly those concerning covert action.⁶ Lehman explained that the director felt that answering these questions would go beyond the guidelines set by President Ford. He underscored that the DCI hoped to avoid being put in the position of having to refuse to answer certain questions.

Carter, Mondale, and Eizenstat left with Agency officers a number of factual questions that there had not been time to discuss during the briefing. Lehman provided Eizenstat answers to some of these questions by telephone; others were simply lost in the press of business. One matter about which Carter asked showed he had carefully studied the foreign policy issues in which John Kennedy had become involved during his candidacy some 16 years earlier. That was Taiwan and the offshore islands. Lehman consulted in Washington before articulating precisely for the governor what the US commitment was to defending Quemoy, Matsu, and certain other territories. In fact, this issue, which had been so important in the 1960 campaign, did not play a significant role in 1976.

Agency officers were pleased when Eizenstat informed Lehman on 29 July, the day following the initial session, that Carter had been "extremely pleased with the briefings." In response to Lehman's question, Eizenstat indicated the governor had no suggestions for any changes in the format, the level of detail, or the length of the briefings, having described them as just right. Senior Agency officers had been anxious, unable to believe that Carter really wanted to sit through six hours of nonstop briefings. The participants had been impressed not only with the governor's endurance and interest but with the hospitality he and Mrs. Carter had shown them. They were particularly touched that Mrs. Carter brought in a bowl of peaches in the late afternoon, a welcome diversion after several hours of briefings.

⁶ Richard Lehman, "Conversation with Stuart Eizenstat," memorandum for the record, 3 August 1976.

The second major preelection briefing of Carter took place in Plains two weeks later on 12 August. At least in the memory of one working-level officer who took part, the most dramatic and memorable moment occurred not during the session with Carter himself but during the helicopter flight from Fort Benning to Plains. Asked if he had had a difficult flight, he remembered, "Not at all. It was fine. The problem was that during the short flight I realized I had left my briefing materials back in the Operations Center at Headquarters. It was your worst nightmare, going with the director to brief the man who may be the next president and forgetting your materials."

The rattled briefers were further shaken when they arrived. With some time to spare before they were due at Carter's home, they visited the Carter campaign headquarters where they were introduced to the governor's mother, Lillian Carter. Upon meeting the CIA officers, Mrs. Carter volunteered that she understood that "Jimmy was going to clear the government of all vestiges of Republicans, including CIA Director Bush." Her plainspoken prediction reflected progressively more pointed comments the candidate had been making to the press about the possibility of replacing key government officials, including Bush.

Bush himself was realistic and outwardly relaxed about the likelihood that he would be replaced, joking about it with his CIA colleagues. The latter were more apprehensive about the prospect that, if their boss were replaced, the job would be "politicized." They were acutely aware that the four previous presidents had not appointed a new DCI when they came into office. The last such occasion had been Eisenhower's appointment of Allen Dulles 24 years earlier.

Having learned in the first session that Carter was likely to ask numerous and detailed questions, Bush brought eight CIA officers with him to the second briefing to ensure that the team could handle any subject the governor might raise. Carter again asked that Mondale be present and this time also included Eizenstat and Mondale's foreign policy aide, David Aaron. Aaron's inclusion, at Carter's request, helped relieve an awkward situation. Aaron had shown up at the first session but had not been permitted to attend, as his role was unclear. In time, he was to become the deputy national security advisor. Zbigniew Brzezinski had not yet been named national security advisor and did not attend any of the briefing sessions.

The substantive issues discussed during the second session related primarily to the status of Soviet conventional forces and to developments in China. In addition, an overview of current developments was provided that focused on Greek-Turkish tensions, strains between Egypt and Libya, a recent Rhodesian raid into Mozambique, the problems of Somalia and Djibouti, a recent exchange of fire across the Demilitarized Zone in Korea, and civil strife in Leb-

anon. There was also considerable discussion, as at the first briefing, of Soviet strategic programs and arms control negotiating issues. The status of Soviet Backfire bomber and SS-X-20 missile programs was carefully reviewed.⁷

Obviously feeling more relaxed than he had in the earlier session, Bush led off this second exchange with some more expansive general comments and introductions of the other participants. Throughout the discussions he made occasional comments, using to advantage his experience as US representative in Beijing. Carter was again a very active participant with so many questions and comments that the briefers were unable to cover the requested topics, even though the session lasted from 11:00 a.m. until almost 5:00 p.m.

One of the participants remembers, "I was impressed with Carter. He was a very, very quick study, able to digest immediately everything we gave him—fact after fact. He seemed to have a photographic memory and would often repeat back to us the points we had made to be absolutely sure that he understood. He used his very detailed questions to be certain he understood the nuances, which he described with precision when he rephrased the points we had made."⁸ The CIA participants, arrayed in a circle in Carter's family room, watched with fascination as the governor, from his corner of the room, would spin the globe next to his chair as if to allow it to determine the country about which he would ask next. By the time the afternoon was over they felt they had covered the world.

In addition to pleasing his visitors with his obvious interest in the substance of their business, Carter was a more relaxed host during the second session. He adjourned the proceedings for an hour or so while Mrs. Carter served lunch. The participants, during the break, spelled one another playing with Amy Carter and her cat on the couch.

Toward the end of the briefing, Mondale made an unsolicited contribution that greatly pleased the Agency officers in attendance. In remarks seemingly directed both to Carter and Bush, Mondale expressed his respect for the Agency. He said CIA had reformed itself completely over the last two years, underscoring that this was a remarkable achievement for any government organization. Mondale was referring, of course, to the efforts CIA Directors Colby and Bush had undertaken in the wake of the revelations of CIA misdeeds that had been so widely publicized in the early 1970s. The senator's background enabled him also to make some perceptive and useful comments about the nature of congressional review of the Intelligence Community and its budget.

⁷ Richard Lehman, "Briefing of Governor Carter, 12 August 1976," memorandum for the record, 16 August 1976.

⁸ Wayne Wolfe, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 13 December 1993.

Like candidates before and after them, Carter and Mondale were shown and took an interest in certain unique CIA products. They were each given copies of an Agency compilation of foreign, particularly Soviet, press commentary on their candidacies. Carter was interested in studying some sample satellite photography showing much of southwest Georgia. The governor seemed to find tracking the geography of his home region a useful technique for understanding the capabilities of the imaging system.

Reflecting the governor's insatiable interests, the Carter team had provided CIA in advance of the briefing a list of 44 specific questions that they hoped could be answered. A few of the questions raised delicate policy and operational issues, just as Mondale's questions had done two weeks earlier. Because the president had not approved the Agency's discussion of these matters before the election, the director reiterated the ground rules at the outset of the briefing.

In fact, by the time the group turned to the list of 44 questions late in the afternoon, time was running out and the awkward issue of political delicacy did not have to be faced directly. In his memorandum for the record, Lehman recorded that he was "able to give very brief, often one-sentence answers...this moved so fast that our listeners were unable to check our replies against their list of questions, probably a highly desirable thing." As Lehman's comment implied, at the time it seemed sensible simply to stick to the essential facts and avoid addressing the complicated policy issues, but the matter was not that simple and did not go away.

Not only did the problem persist, it returned within a week, precipitated by events in Korea. On 18 August a donnybrook over the removal of a tree from the Demilitarized Zone dramatically raised tensions on the Peninsula. In the days following that incident, Carter received a number of questions from the press regarding his position on Korea and asked Eizenstat to call Lehman and request a briefing on the situation. The available facts were fairly straightforward, and it was decided that a formal briefing was unnecessary. A senior Agency analyst, John Whitman, briefed Eizenstat by telephone regarding developments in North Korea and the Chinese and Soviet reactions.

Understandably in the circumstances, Eizenstat was interested also in the status of US forces and in the US reaction to the heightened tensions but was reminded that the president's guidelines provided that the Agency should brief only on foreign developments and not on US policy or actions. Eizenstat was asked if he had channels to the Departments of State and Defense that he could use to acquire the information that Carter needed. On hearing that such channels did not exist, Whitman suggested that he or Carter might wish to

contact Scowcroft. Eizenstat responded that the governor did not want to approach Scowcroft “lest he [Carter] become enmeshed.”

Whitman recorded in a memorandum for the record that Eizenstat appreciated the prompt telephone update on Korea and that their exchange on the ground rules of CIA’s liaison with the Carter team was an amiable one.⁹ Whitman also recorded: “It is nevertheless clear that, since we are their only official channel to the Executive Branch, dicey moments may occur in the future.” In many similar circumstances over the years, CIA was to be the only authorized ongoing link between a sitting administration and a presidential candidate or president-elect of the other party. Agency officers have cherished such opportunities, in part, for their implicit acknowledgment that CIA can be trusted to provide information in a nonpolitical manner. At the same time, however, they have often had concerns about whether this exclusive system might not unduly limit an incoming administration.

Before the end of August 1976, separate briefings were also given the two vice-presidential candidates. On 23 August, Bush and seven senior Agency experts briefed Ford’s running mate, Senator Robert Dole, in a comprehensive session that covered Soviet strategic programs and conventional forces. The group also informed Dole of current intelligence related to the Korea crisis, tensions between Egypt and Libya, and developments in South Africa and Rhodesia. The senator’s questions related primarily to the military strengths of the two sides in Korea.¹⁰

On 24 August, Whitman provided a briefing to Mondale and Aaron that focused primarily on Soviet ICBM dismantling and destruction. He also covered developments in Korea and answered a number of questions from the senator related to US satellite reconnaissance capabilities. On this occasion, Aaron raised with Whitman the possibility of the Agency providing another briefing along the lines of those given in Plains, this time focusing on the Middle East and southern Africa. Given Carter’s heavy schedule, the two discussed the possibility of providing such a briefing in Washington to Mondale, Aaron, and Eizenstat,¹¹ but there was no time available in the campaign schedule and the Carter-Mondale team received no further intelligence briefings until after the election on 3 November.

In the 1976 campaign there were three 90-minute debates between candidates Ford and Carter. The resumption of debates during a presidential cam-

⁹ John Whitman, “Inquiry from Governor Carter on Korea,” memorandum for the record, 20 August 1976.

¹⁰ John Whitman, “Briefing of Senator Dole,” memorandum for the record, 24 August 1976.

¹¹ John Whitman, “Conversation with Senator Mondale,” memorandum for the record, 24 August 1976.

paign after a 16-year hiatus raised concerns in the minds of senior Agency executives, who had an all-too-clear memory of how CIA had been caught up in the controversial issues raised in the Kennedy-Nixon encounters in 1960. In July and August 1976, Agency officers were heartened by Carter's repeated reassurances that he did not want to take political advantage of intelligence briefings and statements and that he wanted only to understand the facts to avoid making mistakes.

In fact, two of the three presidential debates included virtually no discussion of foreign policy issues. The debate on 23 September in Philadelphia focused on domestic and economic policy matters. The debate on 22 October in Williamsburg, Virginia, contained only a very brief exchange on Yugoslavia, including specifically the question of the appropriate US response to a possible post-Tito Soviet invasion of that country. The remainder of that debate addressed domestic issues.

The one debate dedicated to foreign and defense issues was held on 6 October in San Francisco. Agency officers were relieved that the CIA and its programs did not become a big part of any of the key subjects discussed. These included US leadership abroad, the proper level for the US defense budget, the US position for future SALT talks, cooperation with authoritarian regimes, grain sales to the Soviet Union, arms sales and peace negotiations in the Middle East, energy policy, proliferation, and the future of the Panama Canal.

CIA was mentioned only twice during the debate, both times by Carter as part of his comments on integrity and leadership in foreign affairs. Early in the debate the governor said, "I've traveled the last 21 months among the people of this country. I've talked to them and I've listened. And I've seen at first hand in a very vivid way the deep hurt that has come to this country in the aftermath of Vietnam and Cambodia, Chile and Pakistan, and Angola and Watergate, the CIA revelations." There could be no doubt that he had carefully planned this formulation: he used almost exactly the same words more than an hour later in his closing statement, saying, "And we've been hurt in recent years in this country in the aftermath of Vietnam, Cambodia, Chile, Pakistan, Angola, Watergate, CIA."¹²

From the Agency's point of view, Carter's formulation was unfortunate. At the same time, there was relief that he had made only passing references, that the Intelligence Community's activities had not become a bigger issue in the campaign, and that the Agency's operations and analyses had not become entwined in discussion of the substantive issues. Thinking back on this spe-

¹² *New York Times*, 7 October 1976, 36.

cific issue in 1993, Carter commented that, in his mind, “Politicization of intelligence was not a problem in the debates or otherwise.”

Operational and Political Issues Arise

Three days following the election on 2 November, Bush telephoned Carter to offer his congratulations and tender his resignation as CIA director. He told Carter frankly that he was unclear about the protocol in such a situation and asked if the president-elect would like a letter of resignation. Carter graciously said that was not necessary and thanked Bush for his call.¹³

In the telephone conversation, Bush proposed they get together soon so he could inform Carter about certain “exotic and very closely held items relating to sources and methods.” Bush informed Carter of the kinds of support CIA had offered past presidents-elect during periods of transition, describing specifically the office that had been set up for Nixon in New York in 1968. In reply, the new president-elect said that he would be very interested in having such a session. The two resolved to leave the arrangements to Lehman and Eizenstat, as they had done for the preelection briefings.

The one postelection session with Carter that Bush chaired took place on 19 November. This meeting was another multihour session in which Bush was assisted by a half-dozen senior officers. The most significant discussions of the day, however, were in the first 45 minutes, during which Bush met privately with Carter and Mondale, accompanied only by his personal assistant, Jennifer Fitzgerald. This group of four assembled in the little-used small living room in the Carter home while the larger group of aides from both sides waited in the larger and more informal study.

Bush informed Carter that he wanted to discuss a personal matter and reopened the question of the CIA directorship. The DCI reminded Carter that there had been charges of politics when Bush was nominated to head CIA and that he, Bush, felt that if he were to leave at the end of the Ford presidency there might well be another political outcry. He elaborated, stating that, if he were seen to have done a reasonable job, the charge could be made that replacing him had politicized the Agency. Bush volunteered that he could be helpful in muting such criticism. He added that any CIA director needed to have direct access to the president and cited occasions when he had used such access to President Ford. Later Bush recorded that, after “weighing both the political problem and the confidence/direct access problem that I felt clearly

¹³ George [H. W.] Bush, “President-Elect Jimmy Carter,” memorandum of conversation, 6 November 1976.

that I should leave and the President-elect should put his own man in the organization in whom he had confidence.”¹⁴

Whatever Bush’s intent may have been, his reopening the question of his own tenure clearly surprised Carter, who had thought the matter settled when Bush had telephoned him two weeks earlier. In 1993, Carter volunteered that his impression from that exchange in 1976 was that “Bush wanted to be kept on as DCI.” Parenthetically and laughingly, he added, “If I had agreed to that [Bush] never would have become president. His career would have gone off on a whole different track!”

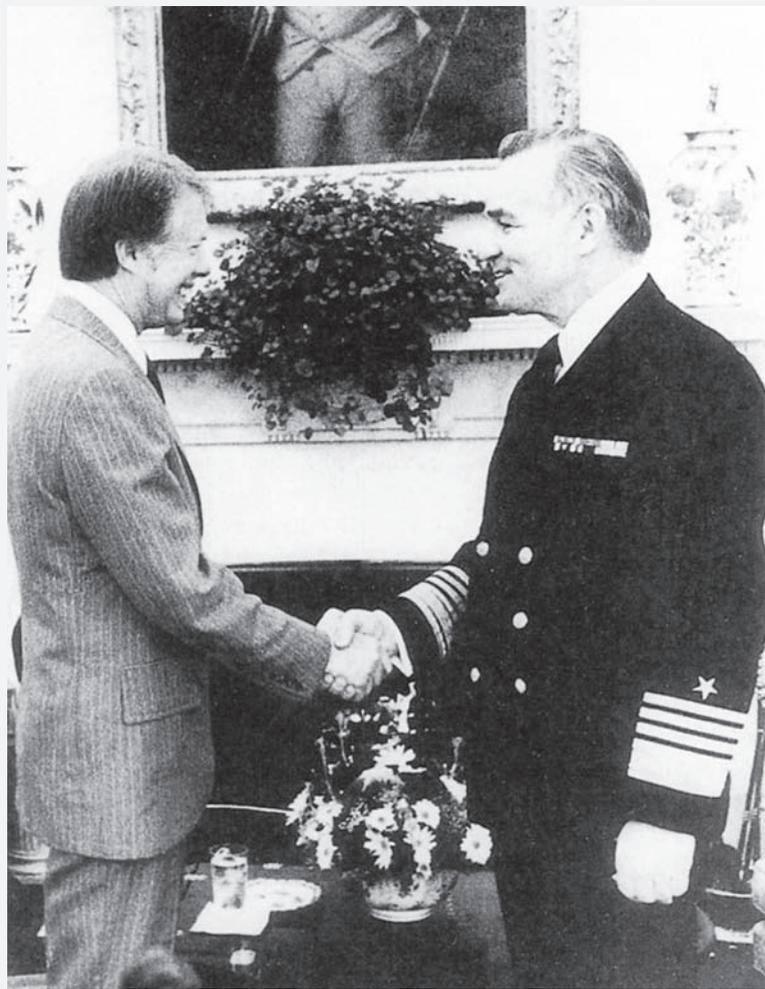
Carter explained, “It would be good in general to have some overlap [of a DCI serving from one president to the next]. But the job of DCI must be depoliticized. Bush was too political. That is why I selected Stan Turner. He didn’t want the job, he wanted to be CNO [Chief of Naval Operations].”

Carter was unambiguous in his response after Bush finished his discussion of the pros and cons of staying on as director. The DCI had finished with an observation that—all things considered—he probably should be replaced. The president-elect, according to Bush, “simply said ‘Okay,’ or something like this, with no discussion, no questions about any of the points I had made.... As in the rest of the briefing, Carter was very cold or cool, no editorializing, no niceties, very business-like.” Bush also noted that Mondale at this point “spoke up and rather generously said that things had gotten better since I’d been there.” The three concluded with a discussion of the timing of the announcement of a new CIA director-designate.

Given Carter’s expressed views on the politicization issue, senior Agency officers later found it ironic that his first choice for CIA Director was Theodore Sorensen, the former Kennedy political adviser and speechwriter. Sorensen was nominated on 24 December but in mid-January withdrew his name because of mounting criticism that he had played a very political role in the Kennedy administration.

His private session with Carter gave Bush the opportunity to inform the president-elect of a variety of sensitive human-source and technical collection programs. In the first such session since Kennedy was briefed by Allen Dulles on covert action activities in Cuba, the DCI took 30 minutes or more to inform Carter of specific operational undertakings he needed to be aware of early in his presidency. He also showed Carter and Mondale samples of reporting from sensitive sources, underscoring that the lives of CIA assets were literally at stake. Bush underscored that if the president-elect felt he needed additional information he could, of course, contact CIA.

¹⁴ George [H. W.] Bush, memorandum of conversation, 22 November 1976.



President Jimmy Carter welcomes DCI-designate VAdm. Stansfield Turner.

The DCI also used the occasion of the small group meeting to show the president-elect a copy of the *President's Daily Brief*. He described the distribution of the publication and informed Carter that President Ford had approved providing it to him on a daily basis starting immediately. This subject was to be discussed further in the larger briefing session.

In all, Bush described to the president-elect more than a dozen sensitive CIA programs and issues. At the time of the briefing, and when discussing it

some 17 years after the fact, Bush was puzzled that Carter had virtually no comment and asked no questions during the whole session. He had not indicated whether he thought the operations were good or bad, or that he was surprised or not surprised. He asked for no follow-up action or information. Bush commented that Carter “seemed a little impatient; he didn’t say much but seemed to be a little turned off. He tended to moralize.”¹⁵

In fact, Carter was “turned off” and uncomfortable with many of the Agency’s sensitive collection programs. He ordered some discontinued during the brief period when Henry Knoche served as acting director from late January to early March 1977. There was only one item raised in the discussion of sensitive matters between Bush and Carter to which the president-elect reacted positively. Somewhat incongruously, Bush had taken with him to Plains a letter to the president-elect from John Harper, rector of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Washington, DC, inviting President Carter to worship there. Without a moment’s thought, the president-elect said that he felt sure he would be able to do this.

Bush was obviously relieved when the smaller session was finished and he and Carter joined the larger group for the substantive briefings. The DCI recorded that Carter, in the larger session that followed, “was very attentive, listening intently and showing much more warmth in the bigger meeting than in the smaller.... He called the briefers by their first names. Actually, he referred to me a little more in this briefing than he did in the earlier ones where I had the distinct feeling he was somewhat uncomfortable with my being there.”

During the larger group session on the afternoon of 19 November, Carter and Mondale were briefed on the US Intelligence Community in more detail than had been given any other president-elect before or since. Recalling the session in 1993, Bush said, “I felt that a president-elect should get a formal briefing early on how intelligence works—what the assets are, what’s available real time, methodology, sources and methods protection, etc.” If Bush was the inspiration for the session, the bulk of the actual briefing was by Knoche, then deputy director of central intelligence, and Adm. Daniel Murphy, director of the Intelligence Community Staff.

The two primary briefers discussed the priorities and budget of the Intelligence Community and the array of satellites and aircraft that comprised its technical intelligence reconnaissance program. There was considerable discussion of the CIA’s management of its covert action programs. Knoche ensured that the governor was aware of the procedures involved with authoriz-

¹⁵ George H. W. Bush, interview by the author in Kennebunkport, Maine, 6 May 1993.

ing such programs, including the director's authorities, the role of the Operations Advisory Group and the oversight responsibilities of the Congress. He discussed CIA's clandestine intelligence collection efforts and showed the governor examples of some of the technical collection gear used by CIA assets abroad. Knoche also spent some time discussing the Agency's unique contacts with foreign leaders and how CIA activities abroad are coordinated with the US ambassador in the country concerned.

The group reviewed the history of the CIA from the time of the Office of Strategic Services, emphasizing how intelligence priorities, programs, and resource levels had evolved through the decades of the 1950s and 1960s and until 1976. As a result of this extended discussion, Carter came to the presidency with a more detailed understanding of the capabilities and activities of the US Intelligence Community than any previous president had possessed at that early stage.

During the afternoon session there was also a discussion of selected substantive issues in which Carter had specifically indicated an interest. These included the politics of OPEC and the international petroleum situation. As in the preelection sessions, the Agency's director of current intelligence provided an update on crisis areas: Lebanon, the Arab-Israeli situation, the Horn of Africa, Rhodesia, and Soviet-Polish tensions. The governor was also provided an oral briefing and written information regarding Soviet views and statements on the incoming administration, specifically related to the politics of arms control.¹⁶

Throughout the day, Carter continued to be an active participant in the discussions; he and Mondale both had numerous comments and questions about the Soviet topics. They had received communications from Soviet General Secretary Brezhnev and Ambassador Dobrynin and were interested in discussing the meaning and implications of those messages. The president- and vice president-elect repeatedly sought to clarify whether one dared rely on Soviet statements. Bush and Lehman, a long-time CIA Soviet expert, came away from the session pleased at the depth of Carter's interest in Soviet matters. They appreciated the perceptive questions he asked but also thought he had some decidedly naive and unrealistic ideas about the Soviet Union. Lehman recalled in 1993 that, while Carter clearly understood the issues in an abstract way, he "obviously had no comprehension of the Soviet system as it actually worked. Later, when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, it was as if the scales had dropped from his eyes."

¹⁶ Richard Lehman, "Briefing of the President-elect," memorandum for the record, 19 November 1976.

Lehman at one point offered to have Agency specialists prepare a paper for Carter on the subject of how the Soviet system worked. Back in Washington, with the paper in preparation, Lehman was discouraged when Mondale adviser Aaron called “with glee” to report that the president-elect had declined to have the paper prepared after all. Unintentionally, perhaps, senior Agency officers had got themselves in the middle of some delicate maneuvering among Carter’s advisers regarding who would have the new president’s ear regarding how he should look at the Soviet Union and its leaders.

The last item of the day was to clarify with the governor whether he wished to receive the PDB on a daily basis in Plains. Bush had extended President Ford’s offer during their private session several hours earlier, and Carter apparently had been pondering it throughout the afternoon briefings. When Lehman raised the question again before their departure, Carter accepted Ford’s offer and said the sample copy that had been shown him looked useful. Lehman noted that, although Aaron objected—presumably because he would not be present—the decision was made to station a CIA officer in Plains to provide the PDB. This daily support began on 29 November.

Knoche, the most active player on the Agency’s side, came away from the 19 November session predicting that CIA would find “a good customer and champion of intelligence during Carter’s incumbency in the White House.” Lehman recorded that “the general tone of the entire session was extremely friendly and as intense as the previous ones.” For his part, the president-elect, during an unusual public session with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said on 23 November: “President Ford has been very gracious to me in letting me meet with his key leaders.... I have had a complete briefing from the CIA which will be set up on a daily basis from now on.”¹⁷

With Carter having clarified his intention to replace Bush as DCI during the 19 November meeting, the director on 24 November publicly announced his resignation. To no one’s surprise, the novelty of a newly elected president promptly replacing the CIA director led the press to read the most ominous possible interpretation into the announcement. Evans and Novak, for example, opined that “the departure of George Bush from the CIA sooner than anybody expected...stems from the nature of his encounter with President-elect Carter during the transition.” The journalist team wrote that “Bush’s six-hour intelligence briefing of Carter at Plains on November 19 was called a ‘disaster’ by one Carter insider.” They cited a “key Carterite” as telling them that “Jimmy just wasn’t impressed with Bush.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Jimmy Carter, “President-elect Jimmy Carter’s Views Concerning Foreign Policy,” Briefing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 23 November 1976.

¹⁸ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, *Washington Post*, 27 November 1976.

The Evans-Novak article appeared on a Saturday morning. By midafternoon, Jody Powell telephoned Bush to report that Carter had asked him to pass along his feeling that the article was all nonsense (in fact using a more graphic term to characterize the nonsense). Powell expressed Carter's very high regard for Bush and indicated the president-elect would be making a statement personally to set the record straight. At the same time, Aaron telephoned Knoche to pass along much the same message and to underscore that Carter was very high on CIA. Agency personnel were heartened on 29 November when Carter released a statement describing as "completely untrue" reports that he was displeased with the caliber of the briefings he had received from the outgoing CIA director. Powell added on that date that Carter had found the briefings "professional, competent, and most helpful."¹⁹

In discussing the sessions during an interview in 1994, Ambassador Mondale recalled that Carter had been particularly fond of the briefings and focused on the material "with extraordinary intensity." He remembered with a smile that "a fellow named George Bush came down" to Plains to guide them through "stacks of maps and graphs and other data." Mondale observed that he and Carter found the sessions "extremely useful in helping to understand the realities of foreign events at the time."²⁰

A final briefing session was held in Plains on 3 December, without the DCI and the large contingent of experts. Lehman recalls, "I traveled to Plains alone. It was pouring rain, there was a cordon of Secret Service at the governor's home and he was in the house alone; no servants, no staff, nobody. For two and a half hours we roamed over a wide range of intelligence business and certain substantive issues." Two additional sessions were held on 9 and 10 December at Blair House in Washington, DC. Lehman was also the briefer at these sessions, which were abbreviated but included the usual mix of agenda items touching on intelligence operations and developments abroad. Bush stopped by the session on 9 December to give Carter a 20-minute update on a half-dozen sensitive operational developments and to inquire how the briefings were going. Carter expressed his satisfaction with the support he was receiving, including in Plains. He good-naturedly refused to be drawn out on who would be appointed DCI.

¹⁹ United Press International, 29 November 1976.

²⁰ Walter Mondale, interview by an Agency officer in Tokyo, Japan, 15 April 1994.

Carter's Use of the *President's Daily Brief*

Immediately after the Thanksgiving holiday, the Agency began to send the PDB to Carter in Plains on a daily basis. This established another precedent in terms of the level of support provided a president-elect during the transition period. Each morning at 6:30, a copy of exactly the same document that was about to be shown President Ford was faxed to Plains by the White House Communications Agency. At the Georgia end, CIA had stationed a midlevel officer who was responsible for receiving the document and delivering it to Carter personally at 8:00.

The CIA officer who met with Carter was John Biddiscomb, an imagery specialist from the Directorate of Science and Technology. Biddiscomb was selected because he would be adept at answering any questions Carter had on the satellite photography that was sent to Plains along with the text of the daily current intelligence items. It was not thought that the Agency should station a more senior substantive expert in Plains, in part, because Carter's foreign affairs advisers were in Atlanta or Washington and were uneasy at the prospect that the daily sessions might turn into extended substantive discussions in which they were not involved. Carter was a punctual and interested reader. He would arrive at his office each morning at 8:00 to meet Biddiscomb and would typically spend 30 to 45 minutes reading through the day's current intelligence. Biddiscomb recalls that Carter always extended a warm welcome and was appreciative of the material made available to him. He showed particular interest in items on the Soviet Union and international petroleum matters.²¹

As the weeks went along, Carter was sent a considerable volume of supplementary material in addition to the PDB. This material included biographies of key world leaders, more detailed information on crises abroad, and the reactions of foreign governments to the new US administration. When Carter had finished reading the PDB or other material, he would initial it with a "JC." At the conclusion of each day's session, Biddiscomb would telephone Lehman at CIA with feedback on Carter's interests and to pass along any questions that the governor may have had.

The Agency's continuous presence in Plains gave it an unusual degree of access to the president-elect. The ground rules in Plains were that only Biddiscomb and Carter's own appointments secretary had the authority to call him directly at any time. In fact, CIA did not exercise this prerogative of special access with the exception of one occasion on which Biddiscomb contacted Carter late one evening to pass along a message from Aaron in Washington. While Biddiscomb appreciated Carter's graciousness and the access he was

²¹ John Biddiscomb, telephone interview by the author, 28 April 1993.

granted, there was throughout the period a continuing formality to the early-morning sessions that did not really permit the establishment of a familiar relationship with the president-elect.

The occasional light moments that occurred arose typically when Carter's brother, Billy, would put in an appearance at the president-elect's office. On one occasion Billy inquired of his brother whether he had permission to ask the CIA to "take care of some of these reporters" who were becoming a bit oppressive. Ever cautious, the president-elect said, "You'll have to ask Mr. Biddiscomb about that." Biddiscomb wisely replied that the Agency had its hands full dealing with reporters itself and probably could not be much help. In reality, Biddiscomb was relieved that the press contingent in Georgia showed very little interest in the CIA presence, once it had become clear that it was a routine daily operation that would result in no announcements to the press. He had made no particular efforts to avoid the press, which in any case would have been impossible in the setting. Not infrequently, for example, he found himself in a local restaurant surrounded by reporters and Secret Service officers. On one occasion, the president-elect and his family were there as well.

When Lehman briefed Carter in Plains on 3 December and during his visit to Washington on 9 December, the first item on his agenda was to elicit Carter's reaction to the PDB and the supplementary material he had been receiving since Thanksgiving.²² Lehman's memorandums for the record make clear that Carter did not find the PDB satisfactory. The governor was aware that no changes would be made until after his inauguration on 21 January, but he underscored that he would expect changes, once that date arrived. Carter stressed that he was "a voracious reader of the press" and would prefer a publication that contained only items not covered in the newspapers.

During their first discussion of the PDB format, Lehman left with Carter samples of PDBs that had been prepared for the last four presidents to illustrate some of the different options available. As a first step, Carter asked Lehman to experiment with the supplemental material, adding longer pieces with more background material. These were to include "insights into proposals that might be coming from other countries," for example those relating to Middle East peace negotiations. Carter also asked on that date for additional biographical material on foreign leaders. Lehman left with him a collection of biographies on key Chinese officials.

By the time Carter and Lehman met at Blair House on 10 December, it was obvious the president-elect was a little impatient that he would have to wait

²² Richard Lehman, "Briefing of the President-elect," memorandum for the record, 13 December 1976.

until January to receive the publications in the form he preferred. A big part of the problem seemed to be that the PDB being prepared for the outgoing president appeared in a different format than the material prepared for the president-elect in the separate supplement. The governor was reading both but was unhappy. Lehman's reaction was to direct that for the next few weeks CIA should print the supplement in the same format as the PDB and transmit both to Plains at the same time and as one package so that they would look alike to the governor. Following the inauguration, the supplement could be dropped and all appropriate material published in the PDB in whatever format the governor preferred.

On 10 December, Lehman also took the opportunity to introduce David Peterson, the CIA officer responsible for the production of the PDB. Lehman indicated that Peterson would deliver the PDB to Governor Carter the next time he came to Washington. In his memorandum for the record, Lehman, obviously mindful of the Agency's practice earlier in the Ford administration, noted that he hoped to develop a situation in which Peterson would be briefing the president every morning after the inauguration, adding that he had not yet suggested this to the Carter entourage. During their first meeting, Carter remarked to Peterson that he liked the PDB but would want to talk with him further about its contents at a later time, probably after the inauguration.²³

Carter seemed to enjoy and benefit from the substantive discussions held at Blair House during his visits to Washington in the transition period. In the presence of more senior Agency officers in Washington, he was considerably more expansive in his comments than he was during the daily current intelligence sessions in Plains. In these relatively informal and relaxed sessions, the president-elect was even able occasionally to find some humor in the intelligence he was provided, joking among other things about the positive statements Libyan leader Qadhafi was making about the upcoming Democratic administration in Washington. Carter commented in 1993 that he remembered the Blair House sessions as being very useful to him—not only the briefings provided by CIA but also one given him by representatives of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The JCS briefers had met with Carter at Blair House to go over with him his responsibilities in the event of nuclear attack. Carter recalls taking particular pride in insisting that the vice president-elect also receive this briefing in order to prepare for the eventuality that he might need to discharge those weighty responsibilities. To Carter's knowledge, vice presidents had not previously been briefed in such a way.

²³ David Peterson, interview by the author in McLean, Virginia, 4 March 1993.

During the last of the Blair House sessions, Carter settled on a version of the PDB that he liked. The format he selected was notable primarily for the large amount of white space on the page—space in which he could write notes. On Inauguration Day, 20 January, Peterson met with Carter and presented him the first issue of the PDB printed in the new format.

With Bush having resigned effective 20 January, it fell to Acting DCI Knoche to meet with the new president and his national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the next day to brief them on a sensitive satellite collection capability that had not previously been discussed. On that occasion Carter affirmed to Knoche personally that he wanted him to act as DCI until a successor was confirmed (Sorensen by that time had withdrawn his name). Carter expressed his pride in CIA and indicated that Knoche had his full confidence. A bit more than two weeks later, on 5 February, Carter telephoned Knoche to inform him that Adm. Stansfield Turner would be nominated to be the next director.

Carter used the occasion of the first meeting of the National Security Council on 22 January to underscore to all attendees the importance of the PDB, which he thought had “sharpened in focus in recent days.”²⁴ Confirming again that he had been disappointed by earlier versions that he found wordy and “no different from the *New York Times*,” he asked Knoche to ensure that the publication continued to be “sharp and focused, brief and clear as to what the intelligence is.” Carter directed that Knoche should disseminate the PDB only to him, the vice president, the secretaries of state and defense, and the national security advisor, at the same time informing both secretaries that their deputies would not receive it.

Brzezinski and Aaron had not been seeing the PDB during the transition period, so it fell to Peterson to talk with them following the inauguration to familiarize them with the publication and procedures for distributing it. Carter had obviously been discussing his preferences with Brzezinski, because the latter reiterated Carter’s guidelines for the publication, underscoring that it should not repeat material available in the newspapers.

The new president quickly put into place a system for keeping himself informed of developments abroad on a day-to-day basis that was very similar to the process Ford used. That is, he preferred to start each morning with a one-on-one meeting with his national security advisor. Carter later wrote in his memoirs:

The PDB Zbig brought to me each morning was a highly secret document, distributed to only five people...Zbig and I would discuss the report and other developments relating to defense and foreign

²⁴ Henry Knoche, Memorandum for the Record, “PDB,” 24 January 1977.



National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski and President Carter confer over the day's edition of the President's Daily Brief.

affairs. Often, while he was still present, I would call the Secretary of State or the Secretary of Defense on a secure telephone to obtain additional information or get their opinions. They, too, were early risers, always at their desks by seven o'clock.²⁵

The downside of this system from the CIA perspective was that the Agency's briefing officer was not present when the president read through the day's current intelligence. In discussing this set of procedures in 1993, Carter evinced awareness that the system he adopted had the effect of denying CIA immediate feedback on his reactions and questions, but made clear he thought good management demanded that he work through the national security advisor. Carter remembered, "Zbig was enough day-to-day. I read the PDB and the Secretary of State's Morning Report. I wanted Brzezinski to draw to my attention things I needed to do something about. If [Secretary of Defense] Harold Brown could handle a matter and I didn't need to be aware of it that was fine."

In fact, the CIA received considerably more feedback from Carter than it had from Ford. Heartening evidence that this would be the case appeared within days of the inauguration, because the president frequently wrote com-

²⁵ Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 55.

ments on his copy of the PDB. But this practice was to create another minor problem.

Peterson would deliver the PDB to Brzezinski each morning, retrieve the previous day's edition, and note down any reactions Carter may have expressed to Brzezinski. On 31 January, Brzezinski informed Peterson that he would no longer be able to return to the Agency the president's copy of the PDB.²⁶ Brzezinski showed Peterson the issue for Saturday, 29 January, on which the president had written several action directives and questions addressed to Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. Brzezinski decreed that these presidential notations demanded that the original copies of the PDBs should be securely stored at the White House. CIA had no problem with this procedure because Brzezinski offered assurances that the Agency would be informed of the president's annotations whenever his comments related to the substance of the intelligence.

Peterson recalls that the president often wrote on the PDB and that the copies were shown to him as promised. Carter's notations usually were instructions to his senior policymakers. Such directives obviously were properly the property of the president, the National Security Council staff, and the Departments of State and Defense. For planning purposes, however, it proved very useful to the Agency to be informed of these directives in order that timely and relevant intelligence could be provided to the president.

In the months that followed, Carter initiated one other practice that was immensely valuable in keeping the CIA informed of his policy and intelligence interests and opened opportunities for the Intelligence Community to provide useful service to the new president. When Turner took up the post of DCI in mid-March, he began—at the president's invitation—a practice of personally providing Carter in-depth weekly briefings on a subject of particular interest. The Agency had not had such an opportunity since the period when DCI "Beedle" Smith regularly briefed President Harry Truman. The five intervening presidents had been briefed in varying ways, sometimes frequently and in depth, but never in the systematic way that the Agency was able to establish with Carter.

In thinking back over the intelligence support he received, Carter in 1993 recalled that he valued Turner's briefings highly, even though they were later to slip from their regular weekly schedule. He noted, "From the daily material—the PDB—I selected the items I wanted discussed in more detail the next week by the DCI. I particularly remember the briefings I received on confes-

²⁶ David Peterson, "White House Copy of the PDB," memorandum for the record, 31 January 1977.

sional and political groups in Lebanon, on a new imaging system, and on the South African nuclear program.”

Carter began his presidency with a deep understanding of intelligence. He had received in-depth briefings on developments abroad and on the most sensitive operations of the US Intelligence Community. He had received daily current intelligence support—the PDB—during the transition period that continued once he was in office. Throughout his presidency he received weekly substantive briefings. In the course of four years, Carter was to enjoy great foreign policy successes, like the Camp David Accords, and to suffer great disappointments, as with the Iranian seizure of US hostages. Throughout it all, he received an unprecedented level of detailed intelligence information.

