

“Carter’s Inner Strength”

Interviewee: Zbigniew Brzezinski

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As assistant to the president for national security affairs, Zbigniew Brzezinski worked closely with President Jimmy Carter and knew him personally. Brzezinski reflected on Carter’s sources of inner strength as a president embattled.

Interviewer: Can you say something on Carter as a President thoroughly embattled, how he reacted to deep difficulties in terms of his relations with staff? I’m thinking of the Iranian hostage situation, for example, the effects this must have had on him and upon his work.

Zbigniew Brzezinski: I must say he reacted with extraordinary serenity. That impressed me enormously. He was always extremely conscious of the feelings of other people and very balanced, didn’t go up or down, didn’t show excitement. He was quite willing to say, “This is my fault. I’m responsible.” I have to say that I can’t recall an incident in which he was really crushed or upset, demoralized. Obviously, there were times he was very disappointed. The rescue mission was the prime example, and then of course there were the elections.

What always struck me about him was this quality that I have described with the word serenity, and I have wondered at times what is the root of it. I suspect that it must be religion, because he really is a religious person. I wondered about that initially when I was getting to know him, I wondered whether the religiosity wasn’t to some extent external because it was politically useful at times when Americans were again seeking some particular roots for themselves. The more I got to know him, the more I became impressed by the fact that this is a genuinely religious person who is extremely serious in a thoughtful way about his religion.

He wasn’t simplistic, either. We once had a discussion about what does it mean to believe in God and what is the difference between feeling one has found God or feeling that religion is a search for God, and that the search itself is a definition of religion. He compared that argument to Kele and identified himself with it to some extent, and I was struck as I got to know him that religion is a genuine part of his make-up and that it is a source of genuine strength.

Secondly, I think his relationship to Rosalynn was a very important source of reassurance. She was terribly important to him in a personal sense. They clearly were very close, very close, and she was a very strong person.

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