Jimmy Carter, former peanut farmer and Georgia governor, triumphed in the 1976 presidential election, the first since the country’s withdrawal from the Vietnam War and the damaging Watergate scandal. Consequently, public disillusionment and distrust in government abounded. In Carter, many Americans thought they had turned not to an all-American hero bedecked with medals and honours, but a man from the country. He seemed relaxed, informal, and in campaign ads he dressed in a checked shirt and jeans while he strolled through the fields of his farm. His soft Georgia drawl fitted with his image of being a man of the people; a ‘regular guy’. Gaddis Smith (1986: 242) described Carter as ‘like a surfer who is in precisely the right position to catch the one wave of the day that will carry him all the way’.

In terms of his ethos, Carter carried himself like the perfect antidote to Richard Nixon and Lyndon B. Johnson, who had entangled the nation in political scandal and military defeat. Time Magazine’s report on Carter’s inauguration noted that with the election of this new president, the nation was ‘hoping again’. There were many reasons for Time’s summation. Carter’s appearance and actions throughout his inauguration continued to reflect the themes of the campaign. Appearing in a business suit, rather than the more traditional morning dress, Carter also eschewed the more formal ‘James Earl’ and was the first, and indeed only president to be sworn in with a nickname: ‘I, Jimmy Carter’, he began, ‘do solemnly swear…’ After the ceremony, to the delight of the crowd and horror of the Secret Service, he took his wife Rosalyn’s hand and strolled the mile down Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. At that point, Carter’s approval rating in the United States was about 70 per cent. When he left office four years later, however, his approval rating was among the lowest of any outgoing president. How did that happen?
Clearly the main reasons were a series of economic, political, and personal disasters, much of which Carter could not control. Among them were raging inflation, oil shortages, the Iranian capture of 52 American hostages, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. There were also events Carter might have avoided but solved with enormously unpopular decisions. Examples include pardoning those who had evaded service in the Vietnam War and returning the Panama Canal to Panama. Other contributing factors included his 1980 challenges from Ted Kennedy within his own party, Republican Ronald Reagan, and Independent John Anderson who seems to have siphoned off more votes from Carter than Reagan.

There are those who believe that Carter's rhetorical failures also contributed to that decline. It is certainly the consensus that his rhetoric and oratory were both, in the words of one biographer, ‘underwhelming’ (Bourne, 1997). ‘Your ability (or lack of it) to move an audience and a nation by your words’, wrote Gerald Rafshoon, Carter's Media Director, ‘is no longer a minor matter... It is the single greatest reason under our control why your Presidency has not been more successful’ (Schlesinger, 2008: 298). We agree with Rafshoon about the merits of Carter's rhetoric and oratory and think it is possible that it influenced his popularity and chance for re-election, precisely because his speeches were so poor. Thus, we ask what they lacked, why couldn't he perform better, and what approaches might have been more effective?

To begin answering these questions means investigating the political context surrounding his speeches, intertwined with Carter's attitude towards speechmaking, as well as the influence of political rhetoric, broadly defined. To do that, we focus on three major speeches: his inaugural address of January 1977; the Crisis of Confidence speech of 1979; and the State of the Union Address in January 1980. In so doing, this analysis encompasses three speeches which can be clearly identified as affecting his popularity: one deemed mediocre, one effective, and another broad and visionary. This analysis focuses on the rhetorical and oratorical techniques of each speech including structure, language, and delivery; as well as Carter's use of logos, pathos, and ethos; the way each speech was created, including Carter's involvement; the historical circumstances surrounding each speech; what the popular reaction was, in the short and long term; and what approaches might have been effective.

We have profited in our research by the wealth of information and analysis that already exists. We were also helped by the candid material written by Carter's speechwriters, which included an