

Token Feminists and the Unhappy Relationship between the Carter Administration and
Washington Feminism

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This paper grew out of research I have been doing for the last six years about Midge Costanza, who was Carter's Assistant for Public Liaison. Costanza was the first female to be named Assistant to a US President, and from 1977 and 1978, she was the official link between Carter and women's organizations.

In the course of doing the research, I came to appreciate how few policy advances for women were achieved during the Carter administration. Instead it was an era that saw the beginning of a backlash against the gains of the previous decade. No new states ratified the ERA, Congress voted to ban federal funding for abortion, bills to create federal programs to support displaced homemakers and domestic violence shelters failed, many social programs sustained budget cuts, and a bid to create a cabinet-level position for women's issues was quashed. The only significant pieces of women's legislation were a bill to extend the deadline to ratify the ERA by four years, and the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (1978), which was initiated during the Ford administration and passed without any concerted support from Carter. Many feminists at the time were so disappointed with Carter that they refused to vote for him in 1980, throwing their support to Teddy Kennedy in the primary and to Independent John Anderson in the general election.

Feminists may have had unrealistically high expectations of influence, but they were given good reason to be optimistic.. Carter himself gave them reason to believe he would support their policies: he supported the ERA and had campaigned on women's issues, promising to do for women what President Lyndon Johnson did for blacks. There were also large Democratic majorities in both houses of congress, and polls showed widespread national support for the feminist agenda. Most of all, Carter appointed a large number of female – and feminist – women to high office. He may not have intentionally chosen feminists; it would have been difficult to find high-ranking women in the Democratic Party in 1976 who were NOT feminist. Feminism was changing from a grassroots social movement to an organized interest group, and had built a network of lobbying organizations in Washington and become a force within the Democratic Party. Although feminists would continue to criticize him for not doing enough, the appointments were significant. Janet Martin found that 15 percent of high-level appointments went to women, more than double the 6.8 percent of appointments made by Ford and 3.0 percent made by Nixon.”¹ Two of his initial cabinet members were female: Patricia Harris, an African American lawyer with a strong record of advocacy for women, blacks, and the poor,² was named Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). And Juanita Kreps, an academic economist who had written extensively about women and work, as well as serving as the first female vice president of Duke University and the first woman to be a director of the New York Stock Exchange, was appointed Secretary of Commerce.³ To head the Equal Employment

¹Janet M. Martin, “Women Who Govern: The President’s Appointments,” in *The Other Elites: Women, Politics and Power in the Executive Branch*, eds. Janet M. Martin and MaryAnne Borrelli (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 51-72.

²Margaret McManus, “HUD Chief – ‘Demands a Lot, But Gives a Lot,’” *The State*, September 25, 1977, 3E.

³Robert D. McFadden, “Juanita M. Kreps, Commerce Secretary, Dies at 89,” *New York Times*, July 7, 2010.

Opportunity Commission (EEOC), feminists were able to pressure Carter to select Eleanor Holmes Norton, who had successfully fought gender discrimination as the chair of the New York City Human Rights Commission. One of the most enduring legacies of Carter's presidency for female appointment was in the judiciary. 15.8 percent, or one in six, of Carter's 259 judicial appointees were female, as compared to less than one percent of each of his predecessors' appointments.

Among Carter's female appointments, a handful had special responsibility for women's issues. Margaret "Midge" Costanza, a city councilwoman from Rochester New York, garnered media attention as the first female Assistant to the President. As the Director of the Office for Public Liaison, she was tasked with serving as a liaison to "organized America," including women's groups. In contrast with Nixon's policy of using the OPL to recruit interest group support for the president's policies, Carter announced that Costanza's job would be to serve as his "window to America," bringing the concerns of marginalized to him. One of Costanza's first tasks was to recommend a slate of Commissioners to oversee the National Women's Conference in observance of International Women's Year (IWY). She was able to convince Carter to appoint former Congresswoman Bella Abzug as chair of the Commission responsible for planning conference, and as co-chair for the National Advisory Committee responsible for overseeing its implementation. The appointment of outspoken feminists as leaders on women's issues contributed to the expectation of meaningful policy change in the Carter administration. As I will discuss later, the lack of progress on women's issues was tied to the frustrating tenure of Costanza and Abzug. Both were locked out of policy discussions and left the White House amid controversy, to be replaced by women much more moderate in ideology and style.

To recap my analysis so far, there was very little progress on women's issues in the Carter administration, suggest a number of promising factors, including the large number of feminist appointments, including some dedicated to women's issues.

Why did women's issues fare so poorly? Some of it had to do with the rapidly growing Religious Right and the forces in the Republican Party fueling partisan battles over social issues. But some of it has to do with Carter himself, who proved to be a complicated and often unreliable ally for feminists for at least four reasons.

- First, he had trouble seeing the new Religious Right as an oppositional social movement. Despite his commitment to equality and human rights, he was also a born-again Baptist from the Deep South who was opposed to abortion and disapproving of the combative style of many feminists. His electoral coalition included many Southern white evangelical voters who were themselves deeply opposed to the goals of the feminist movement. His cultural affinity for the movement made him conciliatory, or at least hesitant to oppose them.
- Second, Carter was a fiscal conservative, and balked at any request that involved additional government spending. This put him in opposition with feminists who sought to address the needs of low-income women through expanding safety net-programs.
- Third, Carter saw himself as being "above politics" and therefore was often unwilling to act in response to "special interests," including the women's movement. His disdain for

interest group politics and his fiscal conservatism also soured his relations with labor and minority groups.

- Finally, his understanding of the women's issues was different that of the women's movement. He interpreted women's issues to mean equal opportunity, and believed he had met the demands of the women's movement by strengthening the enforcement of employment discrimination laws and appointing women to high positions. In addition, he and his male aides were uncomfortable with, and in some cases openly hostile to, the outspoken women who were fighting for gender justice.

All of these factors, especially his understanding of women's issues, set the stage the unusual position of feminist appointees in the Carter administration, and their role in souring the once-hopeful relationship between Carter and feminists.

Before going on, I want to say a little about feminism in Washington in the late 1970s, so the contrast between their understanding of women's issues, and Jimmy' Carter's perspective, are clear. By 1977, the boundaries had blurred between anti-discrimination "liberal feminists," radical women's liberationists intent on politicizing private issues, and feminists of color concerned about the special challenges of low income and minority women had blurred. Issues such as sexual violence, pornography, and reproductive rights, many of which had emerged from the women's liberation movement, were being championed by new single-issue organizations in Washington and state capitols. Leading feminist groups had also become much more radical and inclusive and some organizations representing women of color were part of the Washington feminist network, working in coalition with mainstream and feminist women's organizations.

Simultaneously, traditional women's organizations, such as the American Association of University Women (AAUW) were expanding their scope to include new issues and using their clout and experience to collaborate with feminist groups.⁴ While some insider feminists still focused solely on the ERA, a 1975 study of Washington women's organizations found "none of the groups could be characterized as pursuing an agenda driven exclusively, or even predominantly, by concern for women's equality."⁵

Even as the women's movement professionalized, it retained some qualities that distinguished it from other issues-based organizations. Early women's liberation groups had stressed participatory democracy and non-authoritarian forms of organizations, and these values remained an integral part of mainstream women's movement professional organizations. Unlike most social movements, there was no single organization or individual leading the women's movement. Movement ideology, which encouraged women to make decisions and take action for themselves, always worked against the emergence of strict hierarches and fostered a certain dynamism and spontaneity. Not only did Washington feminists not direct the feminist movement, they had to work to maintain any legitimacy with grassroots activists already suspicious of those willing to work within the system.

Carter had quite a different take on women's issues and the movement that fought for them. He shared none of the critique of patriarchal institutions and culture; indeed as a southern

⁴Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2003); Myra Marx Ferree and Beth B. Hess, *Controversy and Coalition: The New Feminist Movement across Three Decades of Change (Revised Edition)* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1994).

⁵Anne N. Costain, *Inviting Women's Rebellion: A Political Process Interpretation of the Women's Movement* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 83.

landowner, a naval officer, and a devout Southern Baptist, he was very committed to the moral authority of the very institutions many feminists criticized. And while he was a Democrat concerned about the plight of the poor, he rejected the focus on government social spending as a solution. While feminism in Washington had become increasingly radical and inclusive, Carter's narrow view of women's issues focused on reducing legal discrimination and helping women advance in male-dominated professions. Thus he believed that by appointing women to high office he had filled his promises to the women's movement, and was puzzled and irritated when they asked more of him.

What did all of this mean for the women who he appointed?

Carter's stance on women's issues created a very contradictory landscape of opportunity and danger for the feminists he appointed. For some, especially those not seen as specializing in women's issues, the large number of appointments created opportunities to make changes below the radar, especially when the changes cost little and did not face any active opposition. For example, Patricia Harris increased the percentage of women in appointed positions at HUD by 49 percent, which led to changes in the policies pursued by HUD. Under Harris' leadership, the agency developed initiatives designed to improve women's access to credit and increase homeownership among women and created programs supporting victims of domestic violence.⁶

Those appointees officially tasked with advancing women's issues, on the other hand, were in a much more difficult position. Like any liaison to a special interest group, their effectiveness required them to maintain legitimacy and influence with both the administration and the groups

⁶Janet M. Martin, *The Presidency and Women: Promise, Performance, and Illusion* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 212.

they represented. Both Costanza and Abzug took stances that alienated them from the administration, while their more moderate successors defended the administration and alienated feminists. For Costanza and Abzug, two outspoken New Yorkers who had already paid dearly for their feminism, siding with the administration meant, in some cases, going against not just the movement, but their own strongly-held positions, something they were unwilling or unable to do. I'll return to this point, but first let me tell you the stories about their struggles in the White House.

The first to land in hot water was Costanza. At issue was the Carter's position on abortion. Carter was personally opposed to abortion, but promised to uphold the rights defined in *Roe v. Wade* and to not support the movement to amend the constitution to prohibit abortion. During the campaign he had walked a fine line, stressing his personal opposition when speaking to conservative arguments, and his willingness to accept *Roe* with liberal audiences. Early in his first year Congress was debating the Hyde Amendment, which banned all federal funds for abortion. Carter's advisors, who knew that his abortion stance displeased forces on both sides of the issue, warned him to stay out of the debate. Nevertheless, Carter entered the debate on July 12, 1977. When asked at a press conference about the fairness of the Hyde Amendment, given that it meant abortions would no longer be available to women and girls who could not afford them, he gave a response that would become infamous: "Well, as you know, there are many things in life that are not fair, that wealthy people can afford and poor people can't. But I don't believe that the federal government should take action to try to make those opportunities exactly equal, particularly when there is a moral factor involved."⁷ The rest of Carter's comments made

⁷President's Press Conference #11, July 12, 1977. Convention, Inauguration, Press Conferences box, "Carter Press Conferences, 1977" file, Costanza papers.

clear that not only did he support the Hyde Amendment, he was emphatic that the rape and incest exemptions be worded very strictly to preempt women from using them to receive abortions deceitfully.⁸

Abortion rights supporters inside and outside the administration were furious. Deluged by phone calls from Carter's many feminist appointees, Costanza agreed to coordinate a meeting to help them craft a private memo to the president. Roughly 40 pro-choice appointees were invited, and most of them came or sent representatives. The participants were angry and felt betrayed, not so much by the president's position – which they already knew -- but by his insensitive “life is unfair” comment. One appointee remarked, “We're on the firing line for him, day after day, representing him, interpreting him. Now he's embarrassed us.”⁹ The remark reveals the complex, and in this case, contradictory location of feminist political appointees. While Carter and his male aides may have felt they were doing feminist appointees a favor by bringing them into the inner circles of power, many felt their standing within the women's movement to be equally important to their political legitimacy and identity. Unlike pro-choice men or even non-feminist women, the stakes on the abortion issue were extremely high for feminist appointees. Some grassroots activists were already critical of their sisters who had chosen to work within the government, and there was little tolerance for those seen as placing their own careers above the concerns of less privileged women. Carter's glib dismissal of the needs of poor women alienated feminist voters and exacerbated painful tensions over class and privilege among feminists.

⁸Andrew R. Flint and Joy Porter, “Jimmy Carter: The Re-emergence of Faith-Based Politics and the Abortion Rights Issue,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2005): 39.

⁹Vivian Cadden, “Midge Costanza: One Door from the Oval Office,” *Ms. Magazine*, January 1978, 76.

And for many feminist appointees, including Costanza, making some sort of statement was an issue of conscience. What was the point of power if it was not used for justice? Why would Carter have brought her to Washington if he did not value her input?

Costanza told all participants at the meeting that the president's position on abortion was clear and unlikely to change, but she also supported the group's decision to communicate their outrage to Carter in a collective but confidential letter. News of the meeting had leaked even before the meeting ended. By the time Costanza had walked down the hall to her office, *Washington Post* reporter Myra McPherson was on the phone asking her to confirm the details of the meeting. The story made the front page the next morning,¹⁰ and it initiated a media frenzy and accusations that Costanza and the other women were disloyal to the President who had so generously given them jobs. Costanza went on NBC TV and discussed the meeting frankly, explaining that it was not designed to undermine Carter, but rather was evidence that Carter encouraged open discussion of opinions. Neither Carter nor his male aides were moved by this argument. When I interviewed Carter, he explained that Costanza asked him, "Mr. President, do you want me to just mirror what you say, or do I have the freedom to express my own views? That was her question and it was a very serious question but as far as being a top representative of me was concerned, she needed to mirror my views even if she disagreed with them, but she didn't see it that way."

Her commitment and integrity made Costanza a hero among many supporters of abortion rights as well as people of all political stripes who appreciated her honesty and courage. Carter's male aides, on the other hand, began to actively marginalize Midge Costanza, eventually convincing

¹⁰Myra McPherson, "Carter's Abortion Aid Stance Assailed," *Washington Post*, July 16, 1977, A1.

the president to strip her of most of her responsibilities and staff and move her to a basement office. She eventually resigned in August, 1978, after Carter's aides prohibited her from making a scheduled television appearance because they did not want her to answer questions about allegations of drug use in the White House. Carter and his aides may have been relieved to be rid of a source of controversy, but many who fought for women's rights and other issues, Costanza's resignation spelled the end of influence. For Costanza, the great frustration was that the debate shifted overnight from the impact of the Hyde Amendment on poor women to the bad behavior of Carter's women. She and the other appointees were in a double bind: to stay silent would have been to implicitly condone Carter's offensive statement, to speak up meant the gaze shifted from the women denied an abortion to the loyalty of high-level professional women. Despite the efforts, the political discourse did not allow them to shift the conversation away from equal opportunity and onto economic justice for women.

One of her last acts before resigning was convincing Carter to appoint a National Advisory Committee on Women. A year earlier, the federally-funded International Women's Year conference in Houston had resulted in a Plan of Action calling for change on 26 issues. When the Commission overseeing the Conference expired, the new Committee was tasked with overseeing its implementation. At Costanza's prodding, both the Conference Commission and the Committee that replaced with it included a number of leaders of feminist and minority rights, and other social justice organizations. At the helm of both was former Congresswoman Bella Abzug. She was the chair of the IWY Commission, and co-chair of the National Advisory Committee with Carmen Delgado Votaw, President of the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women. For those unfamiliar with her, "Battling Bella" Abzug was famous for her outspoken

and aggressive style. Before coming to Congress she had been active in the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, and in Congress she championed legislation for women's rights, LGBT rights, and a number of other controversial issues. Many – including First Lady Rosalynn Carter – opposed the choice of Abzug, who they believed was too combative and controversial.

Although the task of the new Committee was to advise the President on women's issues, months passed without any interaction with him or his top advisors. After repeated requests, the committee was given a 15-minute photo op the day before Thanksgiving (1978). Abzug accepted the appointment, but the frustrated Committee overruled her and cancelled. The White house set up a longer meeting for January, 1979. In the intervening months, Carter had proposed his 1980 budget, which aimed to reduce the deficit by cutting social spending while leaving defense spending virtually untouched.¹¹ Like many on the left, many members of the NACW were deeply upset. Bella Abzug would later write, “The domestic cuts would seriously hurt jobs programs, welfare reform demonstration projects, preventative health services, vocational and sex equity programs, family planning services, and other programs of importance to women. Once again, women's needs were sacrificed to the bottomless pit of the Pentagon.”¹² Just before its meeting with Carter, the NACW expressed its unhappiness by issuing a statement and press release that included harsh criticism of the administration's economic priorities.

At the January meeting, members of the Committee offered the President advice on a number issues. When it was Carter's turn to speak, he chastised them for cancelling the previous meeting and issuing a negative press release, suggesting these were “public relations gimmicks”

¹¹ David S. Broder and Art Pine, “Carter Readies \$532 Billion Budget,” *The Washington Post*, December 23, 1978.

¹²Abzug, *Gender Gap*, 67.

and telling them that he and his staff “cringe when we see a meeting is scheduled with you.”¹³ Once the meeting and subsequent press conference were over, Carter’s Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan met with Bella Abzug and asked her to resign. When she refused, he fired her. By the next morning, Carter received resignation letters from co-chair Votaw and the majority of the committee members. Some of the more moderate groups, such as the National Council of Catholic Women, applauded the firing, but the majority of Americans, especially those with feminist views, disapproved. National NOW sent a telegram to the President stating “The firing of Bella Abzug confirms our doubts concerning your genuine interest in and efforts for women’s rights.”¹⁴ The debate about the fairness of firing Bella Abzug may have hurt the President, but it certainly changed the subject. Overnight, the conversation shifted from the impacts of budget cuts on poor women to Bella’s style. Once again, when appointed went beyond the narrow confines of advocating (or exemplifying) equal opportunity and tried to fight for a broader understanding of women’s issues, the women themselves became the target.

Lessons from Costanza and Abzug

What can we learn from these stories? First it shows the dangers of tokenism, especially when the token is cast as an advocate for the groups she or he belongs to. Tokenism implies that a handful of individuals are being used to advertise a promise (and indeed, the accomplishment) of mobility that does not actually exist; it glorifies the exceptions to the rule but obscures the intact

¹³ “The President’s Remarks to the National Advisory Committee for Women,” reprinted in Janet M. Martin, *The Presidency and Women: Promise, Performance, and Illusion* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 236.

¹⁴ Telegram from National NOW to President Jimmy Carter, January 14, 1979, Names File, National Organization for Women, JCL.

nature of the rules of the game.¹⁵ To say that Costanza and other high-level women in the Carter administration were appointed as tokens is to argue that their appointment was meant to symbolize that the President was supportive of women's equality, even though male dominance continued in both daily interactions and policy priorities in Carter's administration. Tokenism is a pernicious form of sexism – or racism – but it is not without its benefits. Specifically, playing the role gives the token valuable human capital and experiences. A female scientist may be willing to be used as a symbol of inclusion because it gives her access to research support and opportunities she could not otherwise have. But Costanza and Abzug were not scientists or business women. They were not even mainstream politicians; they were activists. To allow themselves to be used as a false symbol of progress was not just personally offensive, it had the potential to destroy their political capital. Carter learned the hard way that appointing powerless tokens as liaisons created more animosity than good will. That he and his advisors expected any other outcome reveals how little they understood about the perspective of the women's movement that had promised to champion.

Second, it shows the fragile position of femocrats, or feminist bureaucrats, in the absence of a women's policy office. Costanza and Abzug are not unique in balancing tensions between serving a movement and an administration, yet the US context is different from most countries in that it does not have a women's policy office linking activists to the government and steering policy discussions. Women's groups lobbied Carter to create such an office, but given his commitment to reducing government, it was a non-starter. I don't mean to argue that women's

¹⁵ Judith Long Laws, "The Psychology of Tokenism," *Sex Roles* 1(1): 51-67; Dana L. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance: The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13 (1996): 115-137.

policy office are perfect, and certainly they have been stripped of feminist influence in most places, but the cases of Costanza and Abzug remind us that without them, the burden of feminist advocacy falls to individual women, who are too easily made into the problem. Feminists may argue that the personal is political, but the attacks on individual feminists who speak out remind us how easy it is to make political issues personal.

It is also interesting to me that both women got in trouble when they were arguing for support for poor women, support that cost money. Keep in mind that women in government, so called liberal feminists, have long been attacked for caring only about their own advancement and ignoring the needs of marginalized women. Yet what these stories show is the crises that ensued when very high-level appointees tried to do exactly that. Not only was their influence cut off, their concerns were quickly lost in the attacks on them. Simply talking about the issues of poor women increased the focus on the women who were powerful insiders. In these cases, at least, it is not that the women tasked with women's issues did not care about poor women, instead it was close to impossible to talk about those issues in the administration a president who was economically conservative.