By William Lasser

Jimmy Carter is doing very well in his quest to become the underdog in the presidential campaign this year. While he may lose the election, the former Georgia governor stands a fine chance of winning the George S. McGovern "I'm behind him 10000%" award for the stupidest campaign statement of the year.

Carter's qualifications on this last statement are numerous. As if "not bad enough, he has topped that blunder by first granting an interview to Playboy magazine, and then making statements which do not behoove a candidate for anything, much less President of the United States.

Playboy is a periodical—which has lost all legitimacy by appealing to what some like to call "present interests." It was not always thus. In recent years, due to strong competition from similar magazines, Playboy has abandoned its attempt to include articles and interviews of importance along with the pictures, and has become a monthly journal of sex.

Surely, Carter, or someone on his staff, knew this. Playboy is now known primarily with selling magazines to a specific audience. Interviews in Playboy emphasize those qualities which are exactly opposite to the ones a candidate is likely to want publicized. Nevertheless, Carter agreed to be questioned.

One would think that under such circumstances a candidate would be very careful about what he said. Carter was not. He announced that he had committed "a blunder in his heart"—a very cash misinterpreted statement which implied, it seems now, only to his religious beliefs, but which caused great damage anyway.

He said the words "screwed around"—an expression which the New York Times has termed a "vulgarism" and refused to print. And perhaps worst of all be accused of lying by President Lyndon B. Johnson of "lying, cheating and distorting the truth," a charge which, regardless of its validity, does not sit well with voters in these times.

These are but the latest in a series of errors which have marked the Carter candidacy. He said that he would raise taxes for all those who make over the median income, then later corrected himself and announced that he would never "raise the taxes of working people."

Carter has apologized for or tried to explain away all of these and many more misstatements. But American politics is a science of impressions—ones can never be sure that a retraction will reach all the people who saw or heard the original statement, nor can one be assured that all will accept the correction.

I do not criticize Carter for what he has said—I personally believe that the remarks were made under conditions of stress and I accept the retractions. But I must be concerned with the whole style of the Carter candidacy—mistake after mistake followed by apology after apology. Such strategies do not win presidential elections.

In playing Gerald Ford to a draw in the first debate Carter has assumed the side of the President's momentum. After a very shaky opening, Carter started the initiative on the anniversary-parson question and clearly bested the President on energy policy. The President's slim victory, as shown by the post-debate polls, was due to viewers who saw only the beginning of the debate, for in the end Carter was the clear winner.

Carter also gained by just appearing on the same platform as the President of the United States. He increased his national standing by showing that he could in fact argue as well as Mr. Ford. Experts agree that while the debate did not change the minds of many voters, each candidate firmed up his own support. That should be enough, if the trend continues, to bring victory to the Democrats in November.

But Carter is prone to mistakes and ill-considered declarations. He does not think before he speaks. He seems to lack an intuition about national politics. It is a matter of experience. In response to questions about the Playboy interview, Carter said, "I think this frankness might very well not be a good, safe thing to do in a political campaign."

The presidential campaign trail is not the place to learn the ways of American politics. Slowly, Jimmy Carter is beginning to understand how the country works. It isn't an easy education.