

The Life of James Earl (Jimmy) Carter Jr.

39th President of the United States

Jimmy Carter Presidential Library



Jimmy Carter accepts the presidential nomination of his party at the Democratic National Convention, August 14, 1980.

Jimmy Carter was a man of high principle, steadfast integrity, and deep religious faith who dedicated his life to public service. As private citizen and public official he pursued the causes of human rights, peace, and care for the least fortunate with passionate determination and boundless energy.

Throughout his life, he repeatedly placed what he believed to be right above personal and political considerations. His quiet voice and ready smile masked a bulldog determination and an aversion to compromise on matters of principle.

In his 1977 inaugural address, President Carter quoted the prophet Micah: “What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” For many who knew and worked with him, those words aptly summarize his life of faith and service.

Jimmy Carter grew up on a farm near the small town of Plains in southwest Georgia and graduated from the United States Naval Academy. As an officer serving in the Navy’s elite nuclear submarine program, he planned a career in the military. Those plans were cut short by his father’s death when, inspired by the many tributes to his father’s contributions to individuals and the community, he decided to return home. After a few difficult years, the family farm and business prospered, and his interests turned again to public service.

He won election as a Georgia state senator in 1962 and 1964 and as governor in 1970. As was to be the case in his presidency, Jimmy Carter’s service in those two offices was marked by the determination to engage difficult and controversial issues—including racial discrimination and government waste—and do what he felt was right regardless of political consequences.

Jimmy Carter rose from virtual political obscurity in 1976 to win election as the 39th president of the United States. He led an extremely active administration, taking on a weighty accumulation of controversial problems and issues, and initiating reforms that continue to benefit the nation and the world.

As a former president, he was equally dedicated to public service in his work through The Carter Center, which he founded with his wife, Rosalynn. He was widely acclaimed for his relentless campaigning for human rights, mediating conflicts around the world, and fighting debilitating diseases in developing countries. In 2002, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian efforts and for his commitment from the time of his presidency to “the principles that conflicts must as far as possible be resolved through mediation and international co-operation based on international law, respect for human rights, and economic development.”



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In 1928, the Carter family moved to a 350-acre farm near Plains in the tiny community of Archery, Georgia. A young Jimmy Carter is pictured here atop his Shetland pony named Lady.



In Nigeria, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter visit with young victims of schistosomiasis disease during a 2007 trip to assess Carter Center health programs.

Sunday school most of his adult life while at the same time adamantly adhering to the separation of church and state. For three decades, he and Mrs. Carter spent one week a year helping build housing for the poor through Habitat for Humanity. He was the author of 32 books. He also was a skilled woodworker, accomplished painter, and an active outdoorsman, enjoying fishing, hunting, and birding throughout his life.

Observers found Jimmy Carter to be resolute and implacable when faced with challenges, which he met with perseverance and pragmatism supported by his bedrock religious faith. He was relentlessly energetic, seemingly perpetually in motion, and his attention to even the tiniest program or policy detail was legendary. His calls for human rights, relief for the sick and oppressed, and religious tolerance were imbued with a sense of higher moral purpose and were favorably and admirably received throughout the world, even by many of those who did not look kindly on his White House years.

In a 2013 *Washington Post* interview, he was asked how he wanted to be remembered. His response: “As a champion of human rights. Human rights are more than just freedom of speech, the right to elect one’s own leaders, and freedom of assembly. They also include the right to a home, access to adequate health care, and to live in peace. That is how I want to be remembered, for human rights and peace.”

President and Mrs. Carter married in 1946 and had four children. The Carters often described their relationship as a full partnership in which they were each other’s best friend. He was a devoted father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

Jimmy Carter was a deeply religious man, a Baptist lay leader, teaching



President and Mrs. Carter wave to inaugural ball guests on the evening of January 20, 1977.

Presidential Campaign and the Carter Presidency

When he embarked on his quest for the presidency in 1974, he was a politician so little known that political pundits greeted his candidacy with the question, “Jimmy who?” His successful 1976 presidential campaign strategy was based on renewing the nation’s spirit and reforming its government following the national doldrums and divisions of the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam era.

In that campaign, Jimmy Carter promised to strive for “a government as good as its people,” an administration that would not be “business as usual” or “go along to get along.” When he emerged victorious over President Gerald R. Ford, President Carter made good on those pledges, sometimes to the consternation of the political establishment, including leaders of his own party.

The Carter Presidency

Jimmy Carter was sworn into office on January 20, 1977. On a day full of promise, he surprised the nation by walking down Pennsylvania Avenue along the inaugural parade route from the U.S. Capitol to the White House. In *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, he wrote of the reaction as he and Mrs. Carter emerged from the presidential limousine: “There were gasps of astonishment and cries of ‘They’re walking! They’re walking!’ The excitement flooded over us; we responded to the people with broad smiles and proud steps. It was bitterly cold, but we felt warm inside.... We were surprised at the depth of feeling from our friends along the way. Some of them wept openly, and when I saw this, a few tears



Jimmy Carter was sworn in as president of the United States on January 20, 1977, by Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger.

of joy ran down my cold cheeks. It was one of the few perfect moments in life when everything seems absolutely right.”

President Carter’s most praised successes in office were the Camp David Accords and the subsequent peace treaty between Egypt and Israel; the Panama Canal treaties; the establishment of full diplomatic relations with China; and the advancement of human rights, making this a continuing principle of American foreign policy. Determined to increase diversity, he appointed more women, African Americans, and Hispanics to judgeships and senior positions than all of his 38 predecessors combined. He won passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, the largest conservation action ever, which more than doubled the size of the U.S. National Park and Wildlife Refuge System and tripled the size of the U.S. Wilderness System. And, as the first president from the Deep South since before the Civil War, he helped to heal the wounds of racial discrimination and division.

A number of other battles and accomplishments have taken on added significance as history has underscored their importance: his campaign for a national energy policy; a politically costly struggle with inflation, which had escalated dramatically because of the oil shock of 1979-80, when worldwide oil prices doubled; a vigorous campaign against nuclear proliferation; an effort to provide health insurance for children and families; and a major focus on education, including the creation of the Department of Education and dramatically increased funding for early childhood education as well as college tuition assistance. Further, President Carter pushed through much-needed deregulation of airlines, rail, and trucking, and the loosening of government controls over financial services and communications—actions that made the American economy more flexible and efficient and better prepared for the global competition of the 21st century.

President Carter was defeated in his re-election bid in large measure because of issues he had devoted much time and effort to resolving: the Iran hostage crisis; the state of the U.S. economy, including the adverse effects of American dependence on imported oil; the Soviet Union’s continued intervention in Afghanistan; and ideological divisions within his own party.

Human Rights

In his January 14, 1981, farewell message to the nation, President Carter said: “Our American values are not luxuries, but necessities—not the salt in our bread but the bread itself. Our common vision of a free and just society is our greatest source of cohesion at home and strength abroad, greater even than the bounty of our material blessings.”

As president, his espousal of human rights had been criticized by much of the foreign policy establishment and many foreign leaders as being naïve and counterproductive. But it had two major long-term impacts. In Latin America, the change in the 1980s from military dictatorships to democracies, which still holds today, was strongly influenced by the firm stand President Carter took against repressive policies in Argentina, Chile, and elsewhere. His support for the right of dissidents to speak out in the Soviet Union, from Anatoly (Natan) Scharansky to Andrei Sakharov, and for the protection of the Polish Solidarity Movement from Soviet intervention, were essential influences on the unraveling of the Soviet communist system.

President Carter wrote in *Keeping Faith*, “I was often criticized, here and abroad, for aggravating other government leaders and straining international relations. At the same time, I was never criticized by the people who were imprisoned or tortured or otherwise deprived of basic rights. When they were able to make a public statement or to smuggle out a private message, they sent compliments and encouragement, pointing out repeatedly that the worst thing for them was to be ignored or forgotten. This was particularly true of prisoners behind the Iron Curtain.”

Legislative Record

President Carter’s relationship with Congress was frequently rocky because of his disinclination to defer controversial issues and refusal to accept “half a loaf” while he thought more was possible. Despite the controversy, his legislative record of success was impressive, 76.4 percent, according to *Congressional Quarterly*, placing him third-highest among post-WWII presidents (Johnson, 84.4; Kennedy, 83.0). In *Keeping Faith*, he would acknowledge that his “relationship with Congress would have been smoother” and the “impression of undue haste and confusion would have been avoided” if he had attempted less. But, he maintained, “We would not have accomplished any more, and perhaps less.”

Energy Policy

The most notable example of his determination to tackle tough issues despite the political consequences was his four-year struggle to institute a national energy policy that would reverse America’s growing dependence on imported petroleum and move the country toward alternative sources of energy. In an April 18, 1977, address to the nation, he predicted the difficulty of the task:

“Our decision about energy will test the character of the American people and the ability of the president and the Congress to govern this nation. This difficult effort will be the ‘moral equivalent of war,’ except that we will be uniting our efforts to build and not to destroy.”

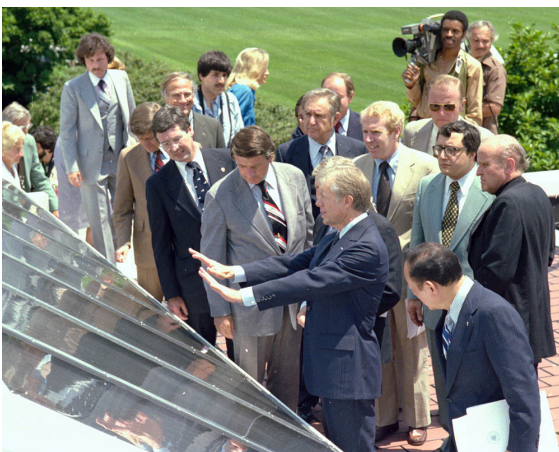
In the process, he faced resistance within Congress and from various interest groups on the right and the left. He believed there needed to be incentives for both the development of energy resources and for conservation. Despite controversy and resistance, in the end, with the invaluable support of courageous congressional leaders from both parties, he gained enactment of 60 percent of his energy proposals. The United States was able to slash its dependence on foreign oil, cutting oil imports in half from 1977 to 1982, in significant part because of President Carter’s efforts.

He created the Department of Energy and deregulated oil and natural gas prices, allowing market forces to work and create incentives for traditional production. At the same time, he emphasized the importance of encouraging alternative sources such as solar, geothermal, and wind. He supported the use and development of ethanol and synthetic fuels. Instituting stiff standards for automobile fuel efficiency and incentives for home insulation saved energy that otherwise would have been wasted.

Some of President Carter’s more significant accomplishments were later reversed by his successors. His emphasis on massive energy research and development, fuel efficiency, and conservation lost support, and America slowly returned to an increasing dependence on imported oil.

In 1979, President Carter launched an ambitious plan to research and promote the use of solar energy. He had solar panels installed on the White House roof to provide both hot water and a high-profile symbolic example. While the panels remained until 1986, when they were removed for roof repairs and quietly not returned, funding for the solar energy program was gutted within months of President Carter leaving office. It was not until 2014 that solar panels were installed again on the roof of the White House.

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President Carter endorsed the use of solar power as part of a comprehensive plan to strengthen the nation’s energy security.

President Carter failed to persuade Congress to enact higher taxes on gasoline or to create an energy mobilization board to speed the development of major energy projects. The Three Mile Island accident in 1978 made it politically impossible to win support for expanding the nuclear power industry. But even his failures emphasized the overarching importance he attached to the issue of energy security.

As he noted in his memoirs, “Our administration left the country with petroleum inventories at record levels, a natural gas surplus and a fair distribution system for it, more exploration under way for new petroleum than at any time in history, and an orderly plan for eliminating the unnecessary federal restraints. The rate of growth of domestic coal production doubled, and oil imports and even total consumption dropped rapidly. A substantial portion of the succeeding oil glut was caused by the worldwide shift to more efficient uses of energy and emphasis on fuels other than oil and gas.”

Had his energy policies been fully implemented and carried on in subsequent administrations, the U.S. and the world would be far better positioned to address climate change.

Middle East Peace Process

When President Carter left office, there was a wide consensus that his greatest accomplishment was the accord between Israel and Egypt, reached in 1978 at Camp David, the presidential hideaway in Maryland’s Catoctin Mountain Park. His intensive personal involvement in the negotiations, followed by an unprecedented round of presidential shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East to implement the agreements, produced a treaty of peace between Israel and its most powerful Arab neighbor that has continued to be honored by both countries, and a framework for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian issues that he believed would have been just as successful if it had been aggressively pursued by following administrations.

He was the first president to state unambiguously that the Palestinian people must have a “homeland” if there were to

be a comprehensive peace agreement that would ensure Israel’s security. That statement provoked fierce criticism at the time. It foreshadowed other statements and actions by him in the decades that followed, all designed to move the peace process forward by pushing participants to deal with the facts.

In his memoirs, President Carter wrote, “Looking back on the four years of my Presidency, I realize that I spent more of my time working for possible solutions to the riddle of Middle East peace than on any other international problem. At the beginning, I never dreamed of the many hours of exhilaration and despair that lay ahead. As was the case with the Panama Canal treaties, I have asked myself many times if it was worth the tremendous investment of my time and energy. Here again, the answer has not always been the same. It will depend on the wisdom and dedication of the leaders of the future.”

Perhaps because even his successful efforts proved to be a political liability, and because of the difficulty of the issues, no succeeding president has pursued the peace process with anything approaching the same level of aggressive, personal commitment.

Africa Policy

Believing that Africa deserved far more attention from the United States, Jimmy Carter, in April 1978, became the first American president to pay a state visit to sub-Saharan Africa. The economy and culture of the United States had benefitted greatly from its African Diaspora, which had originated with Africans initially brought to American shores by the terrible Atlantic slave trade. He thought this created a special obligation to assist African nations in their efforts to achieve human rights and economic development. Optimistic about the potential of the people of Africa, he sought their

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Egypt President Anwar Sadat, President Carter, and Israel Prime Minister Menachem Begin shake hands at the March 26, 1979, White House signing of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty that began an era of lasting peace between the two nations.

partnership. President Carter worked to bring justice and majority rule to southern Africa, and his administration paid special attention to the people of that region, supporting those who were struggling to overcome apartheid and other forms of racism.



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President Jimmy Carter and Panamanian Gen. Omar Torrijos join other dignitaries at the signing ceremony for the Panama Canal treaties, June 16, 1978, in Panama City.

Panama Canal Treaties

The Panama Canal treaties were strongly opposed by many conservatives, but received courageous support from Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker, former President Ford, Sen. Barry Goldwater, a number of other Republican senators, and some of the most conservative Southern Democrats. Less than two years later, although the most vocal critics of the treaties won control of both the legislative and executive branches, they made no effort to revoke, renegotiate, or reinterpret any significant aspect of the agreements.

President Carter's determination to seek approval of the Panama Canal treaties was typical of the sort of issue his advisors frequently counseled him to defer to a second term, when there would no longer be re-election considerations. "And, what if there's not a second term?" he responded

more than once, making it clear that he was determined to move forward on issues he considered important to the nation, regardless of the political cost. In a highly personal campaign addressed to both the American people and Congress, he changed overwhelming opposition to the treaties into positive approval. The treaties were not only critical in preserving a peaceful relationship with Panama and assuring that the canal would remain free from terrorist incidents, but also added immeasurably to U.S. prestige throughout Latin America.

Defense and the Cold War

President Carter obtained the first real increase in defense spending since the Vietnam War, encountering opposition from the left, but also cancelled weapons systems that he considered to be an inefficient use of resources, drawing criticism from the right. He increased funding for stealth technology, cruise missiles, and special operations capabilities—decisions that history has clearly validated. He managed to obtain agreement from our NATO allies to an annual 3 percent real increase in defense spending. His introduction of theater nuclear weapons to Europe sent a strong message to the Soviet Union at a time when it was deploying new SS-20 missiles aimed at Europe. His determined response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—economic sanctions, including a politically explosive embargo on grain sales; boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics; and the arming of the Afghan resistance—eventually helped lead the way to a Soviet withdrawal.

Given his strong identification with human rights and as a man of peace, many Americans came to view President Carter as a pacifist, a serious misreading of his record. Of 20th century presidents, only Dwight D. Eisenhower had a longer period of military service than did Jimmy Carter; and while instinctively opposed to the "unnecessary" use of military force, President Carter was fiercely proud that the strong defense policies of his administration helped set the stage for the end of the Cold War.

Robert M. Gates, CIA director under President George H. W. Bush and secretary of defense under both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama, would write in his 1996 book, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War*: "I believe historians and political observers alike have failed to appreciate the importance of Jimmy Carter's contributions to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. He was the first president during the Cold War to challenge, publicly and consistently, the legitimacy of Soviet rule at

home. Carter's human rights policy ... by the testimony of countless Soviet and East European dissidents and future democratic leaders, challenged the moral authority of the Soviet government and gave American sanction and support to those resisting that government."



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SALT and Nuclear Arms Reductions

Many of the same conservative critics who assailed the Panama Canal treaties also attacked President Carter's aggressive proposal for "deep cuts" in U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty he negotiated with the Soviet Union in 1979. Although the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan made ratification of SALT II politically impossible, both sides continued to honor provisions throughout the Cold War; and his once-reviled "deep cut" proposals became the basis for arms control agreements under both Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush.

'We Kept Our Country at Peace'

At the conclusion of a summit meeting in Vienna, Austria, on June 18, 1979, U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev sign the SALT II treaty specifying guidelines and limitations for nuclear weapons.

In a 2011 interview with *The (London) Observer*, President Carter summed up his perspective on much of his administration's foreign policy activity this way: "We kept our country at peace. We never went to war. We never dropped a bomb. We never fired a bullet. But still we achieved our international goals. We brought peace to other people, including Egypt and Israel. We normalized relations with China, which had been nonexistent for 30-something years. We brought peace between the U.S. and most of the countries in Latin America because of the Panama Canal treaties. We formed a working relationship with the Soviet Union."

The Modern Vice Presidency

Before 1977, American vice presidents primarily carried out ceremonial roles, often leading to frustration on their part; no vice president had played a sustained, substantive role in the executive branch. Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale changed that for their administration and those that followed.

When, as a finalist for running mate, Mondale met with candidate Carter, there was an instant chemistry; the two men discovered they were both personally and politically compatible. Carter made it clear he wanted a partner who could help him accomplish the goals of his administration, and Mondale made it clear he wanted to be an integral part of policymaking as well as its implementation.

Once elected, the two worked together closely, and for the first time in American history a president-elect involved his vice president-elect in Cabinet selection and policy development. President-elect Carter asked Mondale for a memorandum outlining his proposals for the office of the vice president. Mondale and his top aides studied the office and prepared a lengthy memo outlining his prospective role: He would have access to all information in the White House, including all intelligence reports; there would be regular meetings between the two; he would play a troubleshooting role as the president's emissary to Congress, in foreign policy and in working out disputes with Cabinet and other officials; and he would serve as the president's liaison to important political constituencies such as labor and the Democratic National Committee.



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President Jimmy Carter and Vice President Walter Mondale in the Rose Garden on December 4, 1979.

President Carter agreed to Mondale's requests. He also provided him an office in the West Wing and instituted a weekly private luncheon with him. These actions both symbolically and logistically made the vice president a far more important player in the executive branch. The president also integrated the vice president's staff into his own senior staff and made it clear that any request from the vice president should be viewed by his staff and Cabinet as having come from the president himself. For all vice presidents who have followed Mondale, weekly luncheons with the president, a West Wing office, and a substantive role have been part of the position.

Health Insurance

In 1979, President Carter crafted and proposed a plan to provide basic health insurance for every American child and catastrophic coverage for every American family. With Democratic majorities in both houses of Congress and the prospect of significant Republican support, it should have passed easily; but key Democratic congressional leaders withheld support, with the stated hope of getting a more comprehensive bill later. Politics related to the upcoming battle for the 1980 Democratic presidential nomination were also a significant factor.

Inflation

In 1979, President Carter appointed Paul Volcker as chairman of the Federal Reserve, a bold move that served the national interest despite political costs to the administration. The United States and the rest of the industrialized world were in the tenth year of persistent, debilitating inflation, further exacerbated by the international oil shock of 1978-79. Volcker had briefed the President on the stringent policy he would impose if appointed. Having learned that less draconian measures did not work, President Carter gave him the job, knowing the politically poisonous monetary medicine that Volcker would administer. The political cost was huge: Short-term interest rates rose to 20 percent and unemployment spiked in the election year of 1980. But the medicine worked, though not in time to bring any political benefits to President Carter.

A Sea Change in Executive Branch and Judicial Appointments

In an unprecedented and successful effort to dramatically increase diversity, President Carter appointed more women, African Americans, and Hispanics to judgeships and senior positions than all of his 38 predecessors combined.

He doubled the number of women to ever hold a Cabinet post when he appointed three women to his Cabinet, one of whom was African American, and named two African Americans to the Cabinet-level position of U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

By early 1980, women held 22 percent of President Carter's 2,110 appointments. These included three of the five women to ever serve as under secretaries of a Cabinet department, 80 percent of all women to ever serve as assistant secretaries of a Cabinet department, and 40 percent of all women to ever hold an ambassadorial post.

When President Carter took office, no women had ever been appointed to the Federal Reserve Board, the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the Federal Home Loan Bank Board. He named a woman to each of them. No women had ever been general counsel of a Cabinet department. He appointed six to those posts.

President Carter appointed 57 minority judges and 41 female judges to the federal judiciary, more than all previous presidents combined. Pre-Carter, only 31 minorities had ever been named to federal judgeships. He named 57. Pre-Carter, only eight women had ever been named to federal judgeships. He named 41. When President Carter left office, he had appointed 41 of the 46 women serving as federal judges.

Although there were no vacancies on the Supreme Court during his term, President Carter appointed two judges to the U.S. Court of Appeals who were later elevated to the Supreme Court: Justices Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer.

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Former President Jimmy Carter meets with nine of the 52 freed American hostages in Wiesbaden, West Germany, January 22, 1981.

Iran Hostage Crisis and 1980 Presidential Election

The persistence, physical energy, and attention to crucial details that were hallmarks of President Carter's approach to the presidency also were applied in responding to the seizure of American hostages in Iran. All the hostages were eventually freed without a confrontation that could have provided the Soviet Union with a significant strategic opening in a vital and unstable region, but public frustration over the lengthy captivity and an unsuccessful rescue attempt contributed substantially to his failure to win re-election.

Despite the continuing hostage crisis, the nation's economic woes, and continuing division within the Democratic Party, the presidential race between President Carter and Gov.

Ronald Reagan was close as the campaign entered its last weekend. Two days before the election, a new message from the Iranian government made the release of the hostages seem possible. President Carter canceled campaign appearances and flew back to Washington. In *Keeping Faith*, he recalled, "Now my political future might well be determined by irrational people on the other side of the world over whom I had no control. If the hostages were released, I was convinced my reelection would be assured; if the expectations of the American people were dashed again, there was little chance that I could win."

On the day before the election, it became clear the hostages would not be released in the near future. That day also happened to be the first anniversary of the taking of the hostages. Yet again, news coverage was dominated by grim reminders of another disappointing delay, the failed rescue operation, and Americans still held hostage. What President Carter described in his memoirs as a "wave of disillusionment" swept the country, leading to "a precipitous drop in support" and an overwhelming victory for Reagan.

On January 20, 1981 — at the very moment President Carter was watching Reagan sworn in as his successor — the hostages were finally released. They had been held for 444 days.

Of that day, President Carter wrote in *Keeping Faith*: "It is impossible for me to put into words how much the hostages had come to mean to me, or how moved I was that morning to know they were coming home. At the same time, I was leaving the home I'd known for four years, too soon for all I had hoped to accomplish. I was overwhelmed with happiness—but because of the hostages' freedom, not mine."

Citizen Carter: the Post-Presidency

The Carter Center

In his "Farewell Address to the Nation" in January 1981, President Carter said, "In a few days I will lay down my official responsibilities in office to take up once more the only title in our democracy superior to that of president, the title of citizen."

And he meant that. After a brief period of decompression, President and Mrs. Carter went back to work to serve the ideals that had guided their lives. In 1982, President Carter became University Distinguished Professor at Emory University in Atlanta and, in partnership with Emory, he and Mrs. Carter founded The Carter Center to "wage peace, fight disease, and build hope" in nations around the world.

Since its founding, the nonpartisan, not-for-profit Center has had numerous achievements: leading the international campaign to eradicate Guinea worm disease, which has reduced cases by more than 99.99 percent; helping establish grassroots health care delivery systems in thousands of communities in Africa; observing more than 110 elections in 40 countries; furthering avenues to peace in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Liberia, Sudan, Uganda, the Korean Peninsula, Haiti, and Bosnia and Herzegovina; expanding efforts to diminish stigma against people with mental illness; and strengthening international standards for human rights.

In 2002, during the 20th anniversary year of the Carter Center's founding, President Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development."

The Center's headquarters are located at the Carter Presidential Center complex in Atlanta, which was dedicated in October 1986 and also includes the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, administered by the National Archives. President Carter celebrated his 85th birthday on October 1, 2009, with the reopening of a totally redesigned Jimmy Carter Presidential Museum. It is the first presidential museum to highlight a president's post-presidential career, a period that for President Carter was substantially longer than his political career. The Jimmy Carter National Historic Site in Plains, Georgia, which includes President Carter's boyhood home, is administered by the National Park Service.



The Carter Center

Jimmy Carter consoles a young Guinea worm patient in Savelugu, Ghana, in February 2007. The Carter Center leads the international campaign to eradicate Guinea worm disease.

Health

Through its health programs, the Center has advanced disease prevention and agriculture in the developing world. Its campaign to eradicate Guinea worm disease was launched in 1986 when the disease afflicted an estimated 3.5 million people. By 2022, the Center and its partners had reduced the number of cases to 13. The Center also works on regional control and elimination of diseases such as river blindness (onchocerciasis), which affects nearly 18 million people in the Americas and Africa. River blindness is preventable through annual treatment with the medicine Mectizan,[®] donated by Merck. The Center has distributed more than 455 million treatments of Mectizan worldwide since the River Blindness Elimination Program

began in 1996. In the Americas, the Center is working with ministries of health in affected endemic countries to halt transmission of the disease.

The Carter Center also targets four other tropical diseases: trachoma, malaria, lymphatic filariasis, and schistosomiasis. In the United States, as well as abroad, the Center strives to reduce the stigma of mental illness and improve access to and the quality of mental health care.

Peace

Activities of the Center often found the former president involved in unofficial diplomatic missions and conflict mediations that pursued new avenues to peace or eased tensions in such areas as Ethiopia and Eritrea (1989), Liberia (1991), North Korea (1994), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1994), Sudan (1995), the Great Lakes region of Africa (1995-96), Sudan and Uganda (1999), Cuba (2002), Venezuela (2002-2004), and the Middle East (2008).

North Korea

In 1994, President and Mrs. Carter received permission from President Bill Clinton to travel to North Korea to try to dissuade the North from pursuing a nuclear weapons program. The day before the Carters arrived in Pyongyang, the North Korean government withdrew its membership from the watchdog



North Korea President Kim Il-Sung welcomes Jimmy Carter to Pyongyang in June 1994 for talks that resulted in an eight-year freeze of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and threatened to expel IAEA inspectors. The United States began pushing for U.N. sanctions against the North. With no means of direct communication, some began to fear the two countries were heading toward war.

After two days of talks, President Carter broke the nuclear impasse when President Kim agreed to freeze his country's nuclear program in exchange for the resumption of his dialogue with the United States. As a gesture of good will, he also promised to allow joint U.S.-North Korean teams to search for and recover the remains of American soldiers killed in the Korean War.

The talks between the U.S. government and Pyongyang continued after President Carter's visit and culminated in the signing of a U.S.-Korea agreement. International inspectors again began monitoring the North's nuclear program.

In August 2010, President Carter returned to North Korea to seek the release of an American sentenced to eight years of hard labor for illegally crossing into that country from China. The humanitarian mission was a success, and the former president accompanied 30-year-old English teacher Aijalon Mahli Gomes back to Boston for an emotional reunion with his family.

Haiti

In September 1994, President Carter was asked by Haiti military junta leader General Raoul Cédras to help avoid a U.S. military invasion of Haiti. The United States was calling for Cédras to reinstate the deposed leader, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who had been democratically elected three years earlier. President Carter relayed this information to President Clinton, who approved his undertaking a mission to Haiti with Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Colin Powell.

During the negotiation, a U.S. invasion was imminent, and Powell later said he was struck by President Carter's firmness and decisiveness, stating that the president's actions showed toughness and a determination that impressed him. The U.S. invasion was averted, and the military junta signed an agreement to step down and restore Mr. Aristide to power.

A New York Times editorial on September 18, 1994, said: "In undertaking a special mission to Haiti for President Clinton, Jimmy Carter is showing once again that a former president can be a unique diplomatic resource.... Mr. Carter has not flinched from risk-taking and has played a crucial role as an honest broker, most notably in spurring nuclear talks with North Korea but also in civil conflicts in Ethiopia, the Sudan and Liberia."



Rosalynn Carter, Gen. Colin Powell, Jimmy Carter, and Sen. Sam Nunn traveled to Haiti in 1994 to help avert a U.S. invasion.

Sudan

President Carter and the Carter Center's Conflict Resolution Program worked for more than a decade to find a peaceful resolution to Sudan's civil war. Among the program's achievements was the negotiation of the 1995 "Guinea worm cease-fire," which gave international health workers—including the Center's Guinea Worm Eradication Program—an unprecedented period of almost six months of relative peace,

allowing health workers to enter areas of Sudan previously inaccessible due to fighting. This was the longest humanitarian cease-fire ever achieved anywhere in the world.

In 1999, an important breakthrough for peace occurred when President Carter brokered the Nairobi Agreement between Sudan and Uganda, in which the governments pledged to stop supporting rebels acting against each other and agreed to eventually re-establish diplomatic relations.

The Carter Center



Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter addresses an audience in Havana, Cuba, on May 12, 2002, during a historic visit to urge the United States and Cuban governments to mend relations. Also pictured are Cuba President Fidel Castro and Rosalynn Carter.

Cuba

In May 2002, President Carter became the first former or sitting U.S. president to travel to Cuba since 1928. In an unprecedented live speech broadcast on Cuban radio and television, President Carter, speaking in Spanish, called on the United States to end an “ineffective 43-year-old economic embargo” and on President Castro to hold free elections, improve human rights, and allow greater civil liberties.

“Analysts said it was the first time in 43 years that citizens had heard any public criticism of the Cuban government, much less direct condemnation of human rights violations,” President Carter wrote in his report from the trip. “I anticipated President Castro would be upset, but he greeted me after the session.”

Middle East

President Carter decided that the inaugural project of The Carter Center would be to analyze and pursue the opportunities for peace in the Middle East. In the spring of 1983, he traveled to Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Lebanon, and Morocco, meeting with leaders and scholars. Many of them subsequently came to Emory University for a major consultation co-chaired by Presidents Ford and Carter. A book followed, *The Blood of Abraham: Insights into the Middle East*, laying out what remained to be done in order to achieve peace with security and justice between Israel and its neighbors.

For the next three decades, President Carter and The Carter Center continued to work, sometimes publicly and sometimes privately, to support the peace process. This seemed to be going well when the Oslo Agreement was achieved in 1993. Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization agreed on a process that could lead to Palestinian self-government. The Carter Center assisted with the implementation of the agreement by monitoring the first election of the Palestinian National Authority in 1996. But after 2000, when Israeli-Palestinian negotiations broke down at Camp David, the peace process stalled and Israel increased the building of settlements within the West Bank and began building a separation barrier.

Frustrated by the continuing lack of progress, President Carter decided that the only way to get people moving was to be provocative. In November 2006, he published *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*. The use of the word “apartheid” in the title stirred great controversy. As he explained the next year in an afterword to a new edition of *The Blood of Abraham*, “I was accused falsely by some as being anti-Israel. I had left the presidency thirty years before believing that Israel would soon realize its dream of peace with its neighbors. I envisioned a small nation, no longer beleaguered, exemplifying the finest ideals based on the Hebrew scriptures.... Unfortunately, I have been bitterly disappointed by the actual current state of affairs in Israel and Palestine.” While disappointed, President Carter never gave up on his mission to advance peace. He continued to do everything he could for the cause: lobbying government offices, speaking out to the media, advising participants, and writing op-eds and books.

In 2009, he published *We Can Have Peace in the Holy Land: A Plan That Will Work*. He tried to convince Hamas and the PLO to unite with a practical Palestinian peace proposal. He tried to convince Israelis

that it was both just and in their long-term interest to agree to negotiate permanent boundaries, to withdraw from occupied territories, and support the creation of a Palestinian state. While many in Israel agreed with him, recent Israeli governments have not, and he received much criticism for his efforts. Until the end, he believed that the majority of Israelis and Palestinians wanted what he wanted.

The Carter Center



Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter in Jakarta during the Carter Center's observation of elections in Indonesia, June 7, 1999.

Election Observation

Under President Carter's leadership, The Carter Center became a pioneer in the field of election observation, helping to strengthen democracy by serving as an independent, neutral monitor in more than 110 elections in 40 countries throughout the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Before and after elections, the Center works to encourage respect for rule of law and human rights, government decisions that are open and transparent, and adequate resources for all candidates to compete fairly for public office.

Panama

The Carter Center's first election observation was in Panama in 1989. The mission was co-led by President Carter, President Ford, and former Belize Prime Minister George Price. Panama's military dictator, Manuel Noriega, was confident of victory, but when it became clear that his candidates had lost badly, he had the results falsified. President Carter publicly denounced this to the election officials, saying in Spanish, "¿Son ustedes honestos, o ladrones?" ("Are you honest people, or thieves?") After the world media reported this, Noriega's candidates never took office, and eventually he was ousted by U.S. troops.

Nicaragua

In 1990, President Carter again was a voice for democracy in the Americas when he persuaded leftist Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega to concede the election he had lost.

"I went to see him," President Carter recalled in *The Carter Center at 30*. "There were nine Sandinista comandantes (cabinet members) in the room. I met with them and told them in no uncertain terms that they had lost. They were in a quandary about how to accept it. I told them that I also had lost when I ran for re-election. I never wanted to go back into politics; but I told them that if they accepted the defeat graciously, they had a chance to run again in the future." Indeed, after several unsuccessful runs for re-election, Ortega was elected Nicaragua's president again in November 2006, during the fourth national Nicaraguan election observed by The Carter Center.

Human Rights

Human rights was a constant theme throughout both the Carter presidency and post-presidency and became emblematic of Jimmy Carter. His advancement of human rights throughout the world and his campaigns for the release of political prisoners in virtually every country he visited were credited with the release of thousands of such prisoners in the decades that followed his time in elective office.

With The Carter Center as their vehicle, President and Mrs. Carter spent the decades after leaving the White House attacking a host of seemingly insoluble problems throughout the world: alleviating



Jimmy Carter briefs the media during the 1989 elections in Panama, the first observed by The Carter Center.

The Carter Center

unnecessary suffering from preventable diseases, mediating political conflicts, and building stronger democracies that protect human rights.

The Carters and The Carter Center placed a major emphasis on advancing the rights of women and girls.

In his book, *A Call to Action*, President Carter wrote, “The world’s discrimination and violence against women and girls is the most serious, pervasive, and ignored violation of basic human rights.” In public addresses, he decried misinterpretation of religious scriptures relegating women to a secondary position compared to men and practices of genital mutilation of women, honor killings, and sex trafficking.

Carter Center programs emerged to promote women’s leadership in peacebuilding, combat sexual exploitation, strengthen the capacity of civil society organizations in less developed nations to promote gender equality, improve women’s access to public information, and align religious life with human rights, especially for women and girls.

Habitat for Humanity



Beginning in 1984, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter volunteered one week a year to build homes for Habitat for Humanity.

Habitat for Humanity

For more than three decades, President and Mrs. Carter led annual week-long Carter Work Projects for Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit organization that helps needy people in the United States and other countries renovate and build homes for themselves. The Carters were tireless advocates, active fundraisers, and hands-on construction volunteers. They rallied thousands of volunteers and celebrities, helping Habitat for Humanity become internationally recognized for its work. As of 2018, President and Mrs. Carter had worked alongside more than 103,000 volunteers to help build, repair, or renovate 4,331 homes.

In 1984, the international headquarters of Habitat was located in Americus, Georgia, nine miles from Plains. President Carter invited Millard Fuller, Habitat’s founder, to tell him and Mrs. Carter about the organization. The Carters quickly realized that the mission aligned with their values of social justice and basic human rights. Later that year, the Carters led a busload of Georgians to New York City to work alongside 19 families, renovating an abandoned apartment building to provide the families safe, affordable housing. This was the inaugural Carter Work Project and, since then, work projects have taken place every year in a different location all over the world.

“Habitat has successfully removed the stigma of charity by substituting it with a sense of partnership,” President Carter said.

Religion

President Carter described himself as a “born-again Christian.” It was clear to all who knew him that his faith was central to who he was and all that he did. Throughout his life he was active in church work, and for decades in his post-presidency he taught Sunday school at the Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains. Consistent with the earliest traditions of Southern Baptists, he was a committed defender of the separation of church and state.

In October 2000, after much soul searching, he broke with the Southern Baptist Convention over what he considered to be its increasingly rigid theological positions inconsistent with his own faith and the conscience of many of his fellow Baptists. “This has been a very difficult thing for me,” Carter told *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. “My grandfather, my father, and I have always been Southern Baptists, and for 21 years, since the first political division took place in the Southern Baptist Convention, I have maintained that relationship. I feel I can no longer in good conscience do that.” He said that after years of feeling “increasingly uncomfortable and somewhat excluded,” he and Mrs. Carter had reached the



Jimmy Carter teaches Sunday School at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia.

decision to disassociate themselves from the Southern Baptist Convention. The final determination was made, he said, with the passage of a denominational statement that prohibited women from being pastors, said wives should be submissive to their husbands, and eliminated language from an earlier version that said “the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ.”

President Carter repeatedly sought to find common ground and foster unity among Baptists and other Christian groups. In concert with former President Clinton, he led an effort that convened more than 14,000 people at an early 2008 “Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant” meeting in Atlanta. The three-day gathering united major Black and white Baptist

groups, and President Carter said he hoped the gathering would help convince conservative Southern Baptists and other Christians to end divisions over the Bible and politics. “We can disagree on the death penalty, we can disagree on homosexuality, we can disagree on the status of women and still bind our hearts together in a common, united, generous, friendly, loving commitment,” he told the assembly.

Author

President Carter wrote 32 books. Some of his books are now in revised editions, and include: *Why Not the Best?*, 1975, 1996; *A Government as Good as Its People*, 1977, 1996; *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, 1982, 1995; *Negotiation: The Alternative to Hostility*, 1984, 2003; *The Blood of Abraham: Insights into the Middle East*, 1985, 1993, 2007; *Everything to Gain: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life*, written with Rosalynn Carter, 1987, 1995; *An Outdoor Journal: Adventures and Reflections*, 1988, 1994; *Turning Point: A Candidate, a State, and a Nation Come of Age*, 1992; *Talking Peace: A Vision for the Next Generation*, 1993, 1995; *Always a Reckoning, and Other Poems*, 1995; *The Little Baby Snoogle-Fleejer*, illustrated by Amy Carter, 1995; *Living Faith*, 1996; *Sources of Strength: Meditations on Scripture for a Living Faith*, 1997; *The Virtues of Aging*, 1998; *An Hour before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood*, 2001; *Christmas in Plains: Memories*, 2001; *The Nobel Peace Prize Lecture*, 2002; *The Hornet’s Nest: A Novel of the Revolutionary War*, 2003; *Sharing Good Times*, 2004; *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis*, 2005; *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*, 2006, 2007; *Beyond the White House: Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope*, 2007; *A Remarkable Mother*, 2008; *We Can Have Peace in the Holy Land: A Plan That Will Work*, 2009; *The White House Diary*, 2010; *Through the Year with Jimmy Carter: 366 Daily Meditations from the 39th President*, 2011; as general editor, *NIV Lessons from Life Bible: Personal Reflections with Jimmy Carter*, 2012; *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power*, 2014; *The Paintings of Jimmy Carter*, 2014; *A Full Life: Reflections at Ninety*, 2015; *The Craftsmanship of Jimmy Carter*, 2018; and *Faith: A Journey for All*, 2018.

Hornet’s Nest was the first novel ever written by a president, and its cover is evidence of President Carter’s wide range of talents: dissatisfied with the artwork his publisher proposed for the book, Jimmy Carter painted his own to adorn the dust jacket. He garnered Grammy Awards for three of his audio books, winning for Best Spoken Word Album in 2018 (*Faith: A Journey for All*), 2015 (*A Full Life: Reflections at Ninety*), and 2006 (*Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis*). He was nominated and a finalist for six additional Grammy Awards.

President Ford

In a development that would hardly have been predicted by either of them when presidential candidate Carter bested President Gerald R. Ford in the 1976 election, the two former presidents became close friends. They ignored any continuing political differences and concentrated on areas of agreement, working together on dozens of projects and co-chairing several national commissions. These members

of that most exclusive of clubs, former presidents of the United States, developed a relationship of friendship and mutual respect that was important to both men.

At the January 3, 2007, funeral service for President Ford, President Carter eulogized his predecessor: “You learn a lot about a man when you run against him for president, and when you stand in his shoes and assume the responsibilities that he has borne so well, and perhaps even more after you both lay down the burdens of higher office and work together in a nonpartisan spirit of patriotism and service.” President Carter spoke of the two men’s “valued personal friendship” and “personal bond,” adding, “We enjoyed each other’s private company. And he and I commented often that, when we were traveling somewhere in an automobile or airplane, we hated to reach our destination, because we enjoyed the private times that we had together.”

Alluding to the opening line of his 1977 inaugural speech, President Carter, choking back emotion, concluded his remarks: “I still don’t know any better way to express it than the words I used almost exactly 30 years ago: ‘For myself and for our nation, I want to thank my predecessor for all he did to heal our land.’”

United States Federal Election Reform

After the failures of the electoral system in Florida during the 2000 presidential election, the need for comprehensive reform became very clear. President Carter and President Ford agreed to co-chair a bipartisan commission to study and address the problems. The national commission, organized by The Miller Center of the University of Virginia, received support on the federal, state, and local levels. Its recommendations were submitted to the president and Congress and led to the Help America Vote Act of 2002. A follow-up commission, launched in 2005 with President Carter and former Secretary of State James Baker as co-chairs, proposed additional reforms, some of which inspired state legislation.

The Elders

President Carter was one of nine founding members of a group of independent global leaders brought together in 2007 by Nelson Mandela. While no longer holding office, they remained committed to peace and human rights. They worked to bring attention to serious problems in nations such as Syria, Zimbabwe, and Myanmar, as well as advocating for equality for girls and women and the need to address climate change.

Emory University

As University Distinguished Professor since 1982, President Carter taught and lectured in a variety of classes, conferences, and special forums for students, faculty, and staff in all the schools and colleges. His annual Town Hall Meeting became one of Emory’s most important traditions and a rite of passage for freshmen. At The Carter Center, President Carter worked closely with Emory associates, especially with Emory presidents, but also with trustees, faculty, and student interns.

Presidential Medal of Freedom

In 1999, President Clinton awarded America’s highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, to both President and Mrs. Carter. President Clinton said the Carters had formed an “extraordinary partnership,” and that “Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter have done more good for more people in more places than any other couple on the face of the Earth.”

Nobel Peace Prize

A key moment in his post-presidency occurred on December 10, 2002, when the Norwegian Nobel Committee presented President Carter the Nobel Peace Prize. The committee noted President Carter’s role in negotiating the Camp David Accords during his presidency as well as his post-presidential work



In 2002, Jimmy Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize “for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development.”

at The Carter Center: “Through his Carter Center, which celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2002, Carter has since his presidency undertaken very extensive and persevering conflict resolution on several continents. He has shown outstanding commitment to human rights, and has served as an observer at countless elections all over the world. He has worked hard on many fronts to fight tropical diseases and to bring about growth and progress in developing countries. Carter has thus been active in several of the problem areas that have figured prominently in the over one hundred years of Peace Prize history.”

In his wide-ranging acceptance speech in Oslo, he expressed his gratitude to his wife, Rosalynn, his colleagues at The Carter Center, and the “many others who continue to seek an end to violence and suffering throughout the world.”

President Carter perhaps best summed up the guiding principles of his post-presidency service when he said, “I am not here as a public official, but as a citizen of a troubled world who finds hope in a growing consensus that the generally accepted goals of society are peace, freedom, human rights, environmental quality, alleviation of suffering, and the rule of law.”

He concluded his remarks with this declaration: “War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good. We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other’s children. The bond of our common humanity is stronger than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices. God gave us the capacity for choice. We can choose to alleviate suffering. We can choose to work together for peace. We can make these changes—and we must.”

He was the third U.S. president to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, joining presidents Theodore Roosevelt (1906) and Woodrow Wilson (1919). President Obama was awarded the prize in 2009.

The USS Jimmy Carter

The last of the Seawolf class of attack submarines, the most heavily armed submarine ever built, was named after the only president ever to serve on a submarine. In the February 2005 commissioning ceremony in Groton, Connecticut, President Carter said, “The most deeply appreciated and emotional honor I’ve ever had is to have this great ship bear my name.” He said he expected the crew of the USS Jimmy Carter to use the ship’s “extraordinary capabilities—many top secret—to preserve peace, to protect our country, and to keep high the banner of human rights around the world.”

Presidential Longevity

President Carter reached several significant milestones for longevity. On October 17, 2019, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter established the record for the longest marriage of a presidential couple, 73 years and 102 days, passing George H.W. and Barbara Bush. When Mrs. Carter died on November 19, 2023, the Carters had been married for 77 years and 135 days.

On May 23, 2006, Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale became the president and vice-president who had survived the longest after their term in office. They passed President John Adams and Vice President Thomas Jefferson who had left office on March 4, 1801. Both died on July 4, 1826. September 8, 2012, marked 11,554 days for Jimmy Carter as a former president, surpassing the record set by Herbert Hoover.



Jimmy Carter celebrates his 90th birthday at The Carter Center in Atlanta on October 1, 2014.

The Early Years

Jimmy Carter Presidential Library



James “Jimmy” Earl Carter, Jr., was born on October 1, 1924, to James Earl and Lillian Carter. In this photograph, he is one month old in his mother’s arms.

In his 1975 autobiography, *Why Not the Best?*, presidential candidate Carter wrote, “Within our free society each of us has an opportunity to develop a wide range of abilities, characteristics, responsibilities, and interests. I am a Southerner and an American. I am a farmer, an engineer, a father and husband, a Christian, a politician and former governor, a planner, a businessman, a nuclear physicist, a naval officer, a canoeist, and, among other things, a lover of Bob Dylan’s songs and Dylan Thomas’s poetry.”

It was not by chance that the future president would first identify himself as a Southerner. He grew up in southwest Georgia during the Great Depression and felt deeply about his roots. His family had been in Georgia since the 1700s, and his father was the fourth generation—and Jimmy Carter was to become the fifth—to own and farm land in Sumter County near Plains, the small town where he was born on October 1, 1924, and to which he returned following his presidency.

Jimmy Carter’s Parents

In *Why Not the Best?*, Jimmy Carter affectionately described his parents. His father, James Earl Carter Sr. —known as “Mr. Earl!” —“was a very firm but understanding director of my life and habits. In retrospect, the farm work sounds primitive and

burdensome, but at the time it was an accepted farm practice, and my dad himself was an unusually hard worker. Also, he was always my best friend.” The son said his father “was an extremely competent farmer and businessman who later developed a wide range of interest in public affairs” and “was extremely intelligent, well read about current events, and was always probing for innovative business techniques or enterprises.”

Jimmy Carter’s mother, widely known as “Miss Lillian,” was a registered nurse. “During my formative years,” he wrote, “she worked constantly, primarily on private duty either at the nearby hospital or in patients’ homes ... and during her off-duty hours she had to perform the normal functions of a mother and a housekeeper. She served as a community doctor for our neighbors and for us, and was extremely compassionate towards all those who were afflicted with any sort of illness. Although my father seldom read a book, my mother was an avid reader, and so was I.” Miss Lillian later famously joined the Peace Corps at age 68 and served for two years in India.

Life on the Farm

Although President Carter was the first U.S. president to be born in a hospital, there was no indoor plumbing or electricity on the family farm in Archery during his early years. In *Why Not the Best?*, he described how, when he was a teenager, “an almost unbelievable change took place in our lives when electricity came to the farm. The continuing burden of pumping water, sawing wood, building fires in the cooking stove, filling lamps with kerosene, and closing the day’s activity with the coming of night ... all these things changed dramatically.” But his family had done well. In addition to the large family farm, Jimmy Carter’s father “bought peanuts from other farmers on a contract basis for a nearby oil mill, and ... he eventually began to sell fertilizer, seed, and other supplies to neighboring farmers.”



Parents, Lillian and James Earl Carter.

Jimmy Carter Presidential Library

Jimmy Carter remembered walking from the farm to sell boiled peanuts on the streets of Plains from the time he was a youngster: “Even at that early age of not more than six years, I was able to distinguish very clearly between the good people and the bad people of Plains. The good people, I thought, were the ones who bought boiled peanuts from me! I have spent much time since then in trying to develop my ability to judge other people, but that was the simplest method I ever knew, despite its limitations. I think about this every time I am tempted to judge other people hastily.”

Education

Throughout his career in public service, President Carter repeatedly paid tribute to his beloved high school teacher, Miss Julia Coleman, who encouraged him to read widely, introduced a 12-year-old Jimmy Carter to *War and Peace*, and in the small, agriculture-based Plains community exposed all students to literature, art, music, plays, and composition. Many former students fondly recall Miss Coleman telling each of her classes, “Study hard. One of you could become the president of the United States!” Little did she know that one of her students would indeed do so, and that another would be first lady. In both his inauguration and Nobel Peace Prize speeches, the president referred to Miss Coleman’s repeated admonition: “We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles.” It was an admonition that those who worked most closely with Jimmy Carter felt aptly characterized a life of almost constant change and unwavering commitment to high principle.



Naval portrait of Jimmy Carter.

Jimmy Carter Presidential Library

In *An Hour Before Daylight*, the former president recalled that from the time he was 5 years old he had decided to attend the Naval Academy and become a naval officer. He was inspired by his Uncle Tom Gordy, younger brother of his mother, who was an enlisted man in the Navy and sent him mementos and letters “filled with information about the exotic places his ships were visiting.”

President Carter, the first Carter in his line to graduate from high school, attended Georgia Southwestern College and the Georgia Institute of Technology before proceeding to the Naval Academy in 1943. After graduation, he became a submariner and won assignment to the Navy’s elite new nuclear submarine program.

Why Not the Best?

That program put him under the command and strong influence of then-Capt. Hyman Rickover, a stern taskmaster who President Carter said “had a profound effect on my life—perhaps more than anyone except my own parents.” In his presidential campaign autobiography and speeches, candidate Carter recounted repeatedly how when he interviewed for the nuclear submarine program, Rickover asked about his academic standing in his Naval Academy class. The future president responded that he was 59th out of 820, and awaited Rickover’s praise. Instead, the captain asked, “Did you do your best?” Faltering, naval officer Carter gulped and said, “No, sir, I didn’t always do my best.” Recounted President Carter: “He looked at me for a long time, and then turned his chair around to end the interview. He asked one final question, which I have never been able to forget—or to answer. He said, ‘Why not?’ I sat there for a while, shaken, and then slowly left the room.”

That question provided the future president with both the title of his campaign-related autobiographical book, *Why Not the Best?*, and his 1976 presidential campaign slogan. As the years passed, it was clear that those words had also become an inspiration for an extraordinary life.



Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Smith were married July 7, 1946, in Plains, Georgia.

Rosalynn Smith Carter

On July 7, 1946, the summer after his graduation from Annapolis, Naval officer Carter married Rosalynn Smith, who was also the fifth generation of her family to live in the Plains area. The future president wrote in *Why Not the Best?* that after his first date with Rosalynn, less than a year before they were married, he “returned home later that night and told my mother that Rosalynn had gone to the movies with me. Mother asked if I liked her, and I was already sure of my answer when I replied, ‘She’s the girl I want to marry.’” Jimmy Carter referred frequently to his “full partner” or “equal partner” Rosalynn, and their work together to aid the world as projects “we did,” rather than “I did.” In *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*, he wrote: “We had been ridiculed at times for allowing our love to be apparent to others. It was not an affectation, but was as natural as breathing.” On the day she passed away, President Carter said in a statement, “Rosalynn was my equal partner in everything I ever accomplished. She gave me wise guidance and encouragement when I needed it. As long as Rosalynn was in the world, I always knew somebody loved and supported me.”

The Navy and the Return to Plains

In his campaign autobiography, President Carter described his love of the Navy. He and his growing family enjoyed their assignments in Hawaii, California, Virginia, and Connecticut, and a sense of seeing more of the world. But his father’s 1953 death from cancer and the realization of the positive role his father had played in the life of the community led him to resign his commission that same year and take over the family farm and business.

Although the first-year business profit was less than \$200, with the help of his wife he eventually expanded the business into a flourishing enterprise. Besides farming 3,100 acres, the family had a seed and fertilizer business, warehouses, a peanut shelling plant, a cotton gin, and a farm supply operation.

Matter of Principle

It was during the fledgling days of his business life that Jimmy Carter faced an early test of principle. It was the 1950s in the Deep South, and segregation advocates formed White Citizens’ Councils throughout the region. The groups were determined to maintain school segregation, and Jimmy Carter was soon visited by two council members trying to sign him up—the chief of police and the local railroad depot agent. He declined. A few days later the two paid another visit, claiming that virtually every adult white male in the community had joined the council except him. He again declined.

After a further few days, the two returned with several close friends of his, some of them customers of his seed and fertilizer business. They told him his refusal to join would injure his reputation and harm his business, and that out of concern for his welfare they would pay his council dues for him. He wrote in *Why Not the Best?*: “My response was that I had no intention of joining the organization on any basis; that I was willing to leave Plains if necessary; that the \$5 dues requirement was not an important factor; and that I would never change my mind. Rosalynn and I became quite troubled about our future.” A



Jimmy Carter returned to Plains to run the family business.



This poster is from Jimmy Carter's Georgia State Senate campaign. He was elected to the Georgia State Senate twice, in 1962 and 1964.

small boycott organized against him proved to be short-lived. But Jimmy Carter's stand on principle would become only one of many.

Politics Beckons—State Senator and Governor

As his businesses prospered, the future president grew more active in civic affairs. He became a member of both the county library board and hospital authority, was elected county school board chairman, became the first president of the Georgia Planning Association, state president of the Certified Seed Organization, and district governor of Lions Clubs International. He ran for the state Senate in 1962. He appeared to have lost the Democratic primary after a county political "boss" stuffed a ballot box, but Jimmy Carter and his friends worked to expose the fraud and through various legal proceedings got the results overturned. He went on to win the general election.

Although he had low statewide name recognition, he ran for governor in 1966. He finished third in the Democratic primary. He waited about a month, then launched another campaign for governor.

He made 1,800 speeches in the next four years. He wrote in *Why Not the Best?*, "Rosalynn and I in that time personally shook hands with more than 600,000 people in Georgia—more than half the total number who vote. During the last few months

each of us would meet at least three factory shifts each day." The energy and tenacity he showed in this campaign served as a model for his presidential race.

After an upset victory in the Democratic primary, Jimmy Carter easily won election as governor, and in his inaugural address declared, "At the end of this long campaign, I believe I know the people of this state as well as anyone. Based on this knowledge of Georgians north and south, rural and urban, liberal and conservative, I say to you quite frankly that the time for racial discrimination is over. Our people have already made this major and difficult decision, but we cannot underestimate the challenge of hundreds of minor decisions yet to be made. Our inherent human charity and our religious beliefs will be taxed to the limit. No poor, rural, weak, or Black person should ever have to bear the additional burden of being deprived of the opportunity for an education, a job, or simple justice."

The speech gained widespread attention and, along with other actions, led to stories about Carter as a "New South" governor. This included his first of nearly 30 appearances on the cover of *Time* magazine. The cover story of May 31, 1971, was titled "Dixie Whistles a Different Tune" and subtitled "Georgia's Governor Jimmy Carter." Later in his term in office, Governor Carter in 1974 arranged for the hanging of a portrait of Martin Luther King Jr. in the state Capitol—an act that had great symbolism in the context of the times.

As governor, he hired the first African American to serve on the staff of a Georgia governor, and increased employment of African Americans in state government by nearly 40 percent. This included hiring the first African Americans in positions of responsibility in many state government agencies. He appointed the first African Americans to serve on the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, the state Board of Pardons and Paroles, and as a trial court judge.

For the first time, an African American state trooper was assigned as a member of a Georgia governor's security detail. When Jimmy Carter became governor, only three African Americans were members of major state boards and commissions. There were 53 when he left office.

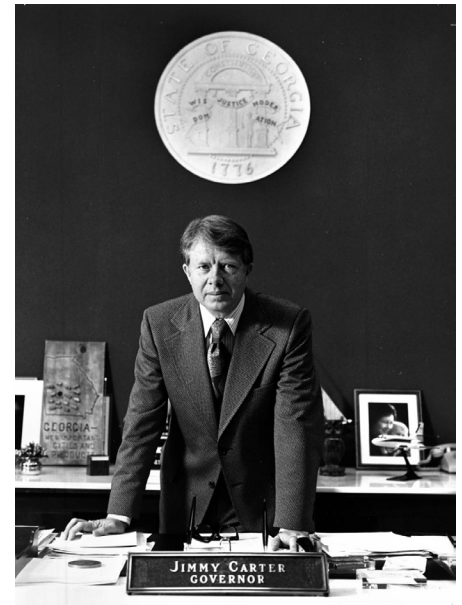
His service as governor of Georgia from 1971-1975 and Georgia state senator from 1963-1967 was marked by the same determination to engage difficult and controversial issues as evidenced in his presidency, ranging from bureaucracy and budgeting to prison reform, education, and the environment.

As a state senator, he was responsible for Georgia's first program to equalize funding for education between wealthy and poor school systems. As governor, he followed up on that initiative with an

educational reform package that reduced class size, supported vocational education, increased the state's commitment to preschool education, and laid the groundwork for the eventual adoption of a statewide kindergarten program.

Other accomplishments included a drastic reorganization of state government that streamlined hundreds of state agencies, boards, bureaus, and commissions into dozens of more efficient, more accountable state agencies; reform of the state's budgeting process; prison reform; professionalizing investment of state funds; reform of the state's criminal justice system, including introduction of a merit system for selection of judges; and initiation of significant new mental health programs. Governor Carter appointed more women and minorities to his staff, the judiciary, and major state boards and agencies than all of his predecessors combined, and he became the first governor in the country to veto a Corps of Engineers water project because of environmental concerns and cost inefficiencies.

Halfway through his term as governor he began planning his run for the presidency. It was a campaign that carried him from relative obscurity to the White House and a prominent platform on the international stage—a platform he used to help better the world for decades beyond his four years in office.



Jimmy Carter became Georgia's 76th governor on January 12, 1971.

Jimmy Carter Presidential Library

President Carter's Family

His Children and Their Families

President Carter, born James Earl Carter Jr., October 1, 1924, was predeceased by his wife, Rosalynn Smith Carter (August 18, 1927–November 19, 2023), and is survived by their four children—John William (Jack), born July 3, 1947; James Earl III (Chip), born April 12, 1950; Donnel Jeffrey (Jeff), born August 18, 1952; and Amy Lynn, born October 19, 1967—and their families, including 12 grandchildren (one deceased) and 14 great-grandchildren.

His Parents, Sisters, and Brother

President Carter, the eldest child in his family, was preceded in death by his parents, James Earl Carter Sr., in 1953, and Lillian Carter, in 1983; as well as his sisters and brother: Ruth Carter Stapleton (Mrs. Robert T.), died in 1983; Gloria Carter Spann (Mrs. Walter G.), in 1990; and William Alton (Billy) Carter III, in 1988.

Jimmy Carter Presidential Library



President Jimmy Carter and First Lady Rosalynn Carter ride on a train March 9, 1979, in Alexandria, Egypt, during a trip to the Middle East.