GUEST ESSAY

Jimmy Carter's Presidency Was Not What You Think

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By Kai Bird
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The man was not what you think. He was tough. He was extremely intimidating. Jimmy Carter was probably the most intelligent, hard-working and decent man to have occupied the Oval Office in the 20th century.

When I was regularly interviewing him a few years ago, he was in his early 90s yet was still rising with the dawn and getting to work early. I once saw him conduct a meeting at 7 a.m. at the Carter Center where he spent 40 minutes pacing back and forth onstage, explaining the details of his program to wipe out Guinea worm disease. He was relentless. Later that day he gave me, his biographer, exactly 50 minutes to talk about his White House years. Those bright blue eyes bore into me with an alarming intensity. But he was clearly more interested in the Guinea worms.

Mr. Carter remains the most misunderstood president of the last century. A Southern liberal, he knew racism was the nation's original sin. He was a progressive on the issue of race, declaring in his first address as Georgia's governor, in 1971, that "the time for racial discrimination is over," to the extreme discomfort of many Americans, including his fellow Southerners. And yet, as someone who had grown up barefoot in the red soil of Archery, a tiny hamlet in South Georgia, he was steeped in a culture that had known defeat and occupation. This made him a pragmatist.

The gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson once described Mr. Carter as one of the "meanest men" he had ever met. Mr. Thompson meant ruthless and ambitious and determined to win power — first the Georgia governorship and then the presidency. A post-Watergate, post-Vietnam War era of disillusionment with the notion of American exceptionalism was the perfect window of opportunity for a man who ran his campaign largely on the issue of born-again religiosity and personal integrity. "I'll never lie to you," he said repeatedly on the campaign trail, to which his longtime lawyer Charlie Kirbo quipped that he was going to "lose the liar vote." Improbably, Mr. Carter won the White House in 1976.

He decided to use power righteously, ignore politics and do the right thing. He was, in fact, a fan of the establishment's favorite Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who wrote, "It is the sad duty of politics to establish justice in a sinful world." Mr. Carter was a Niebuhrian Southern Baptist, a church of one, a true outlier. He "thought politics was sinful," said his vice president, Walter Mondale. "The worst thing you could

say to Carter if you wanted him to do something was that it was politically the best thing to do." Mr. Carter routinely rejected astute advice from his wife, Rosalynn, and others to postpone politically costly initiatives, like the Panama Canal treaties, to his second term.

His presidency is remembered, simplistically, as a failure, yet it was more consequential than most recall. He delivered the Camp David peace accords between Egypt and Israel, the SALT II arms control agreement, normalization of diplomatic and trade relations with China and immigration reform. He made the principle of human rights a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy, planting the seeds for the unraveling of the Cold War in Eastern Europe and Russia.

He deregulated the airline industry, paving the way for middle-class Americans to fly for the first time in large numbers, and he regulated natural gas, laying the groundwork for our current energy independence. He worked to require seatbelts or airbags, which would go on to save 9,000 American lives each year. He inaugurated the nation's investment in research on solar energy and was one of the first presidents to warn us about the dangers of climate change. He rammed through the Alaska Land Act, tripling the size of the nation's protected wilderness areas. His deregulation of the home-brewing industry opened the door to America's thriving boutique beer industry. He appointed more African Americans, Hispanics and women to the federal bench, substantially increasing their numbers.

But some of his controversial decisions, at home and abroad, were just as consequential. He took Egypt off the battlefield for Israel, but he always insisted that Israel was also obligated to suspend building new settlements in the West Bank and allow the Palestinians a measure of self-rule. Over the decades, he would argue that the settlements had become a roadblock to a two-state solution and a peaceful resolution of the conflict. He was not afraid to warn everyone that Israel was taking a wrong turn on the road to apartheid. Sadly, some critics injudiciously concluded that he was being anti-Israel or worse.

In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, Mr. Carter rightly resisted for many months the lobbying of Henry Kissinger, David Rockefeller and his own national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, to give the deposed shah political asylum. Mr. Carter feared that to do so would inflame Iranian passions and endanger our embassy in Tehran. He was right. Just days after he reluctantly acceded and the shah checked into a New York hospital, our embassy was seized. The 444-day hostage crisis severely wounded his presidency.

But Mr. Carter refused to order any military retaliations against the rogue regime in Tehran. That would have been the politically easy thing to do, but he also knew it would endanger the lives of the hostages. Diplomacy, he insisted, would work. And yet now we have good evidence that Ronald Reagan's campaign manager Bill Casey made a secret trip to Madrid in the summer of 1980, where he may have met with a representative of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and thus prolonged the hostage crisis. If this is true, such interference in the hostage negotiations sought to deny the Carter administration an October surprise, a release of the hostages late in the campaign, and it was dirty politics and a raw deal for the American hostages.

Mr. Carter's presidency was virtually scandal free. He often spent 12 hours or more in the Oval Office reading 200 pages of memos a day. He was intent on doing the right thing and right away.

But there were political consequences to such righteousness. In 1976, while he won the electoral votes of the South and the union, Jewish and Black popular votes, by 1980, the only large margin Mr. Carter sustained was among Black voters. Even evangelicals deserted him because he had insisted on stripping tax-exempt status from all-white religious academies.

The majority of the country rejected him as a president way ahead of his time: too much of a Georgian Yankee for the New South and too much of an outlier populist for the North. If the election in 1976 offered hope for a healing of the racial divide, his defeat signaled that the country was reverting to a conservative era of harsh partisanship. It was a tragic narrative familiar to any Southerner.

Mr. Carter's loss of a second term momentarily plunged him into depression. But then one night, in January 1982, Mrs. Carter was startled to see him sitting up in bed, wide-awake. She asked him if he was feeling ill. "I know what we can do," he replied. "We can develop a place to help people who want to resolve disputes." This was the beginning of the Carter Center, an institution devoted to conflict resolution, public health initiatives and election monitoring around the world.

If I once believed that Mr. Carter was the only president to use the White House as a steppingstone to greater things, I see now that the past 43 years have really been an extension of what he thought of as his unfinished presidency. In or out of the White House, Mr. Carter devoted his life to solving problems, like an engineer, by paying attention to the minutiae of a complicated world. He once told me that he hoped to outlive the last Guinea worm. Last year there were only 13 cases of Guinea worm disease in humans. He may have succeeded.

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