

Interview

What Jimmy Carter Did Next

An Interview with The Honorable Jimmy Carter,
39th President of the United States, and Chair, The Carter Center, Atlanta

EDITORS' NOTE Since leaving office 24 years ago, President Jimmy Carter has devoted his time and energy to tackling problems arising from what he considers to be “the biggest challenge the world faces in this new millennium” – namely, “a growing chasm between rich people and poor people inside a country, and between rich nations and poor nations.” As the former president observes, this inequality “creates a breeding ground for disenchantment, hopelessness, despair, and a lack of self-respect,” which often leads the poorest people to “lash out at those whom they hold responsible for their plight.” In Carter’s opinion, the best way to dissipate violence and hatred is “to alleviate suffering,” and that is the broad mandate of The Carter Center, which runs a range of programs along these lines, about half of which are in Africa.

After attending Georgia Southwestern College and the Georgia Institute of Technology, Carter received a bachelor of science degree from the U.S. Naval Academy and entered the navy, where he swiftly rose to the rank of lieutenant. When his father died in 1953, he returned to his home state of Georgia to run the family business, a general purpose seed and farm supply company. In 1962, he won election to the Georgia Senate, and became the state’s 76th governor in 1971. He was elected the 39th president of the United States in November 1976 and served for one term. The author of 19 books, Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Founded in 1982 by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn Carter, the Atlanta-based Carter Center is a not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing human rights and alleviating human suffering. Led by the Carters and an inde-

pendent board of trustees – and supported by donations from individuals, foundations, corporations, and countries – the Center wages peace, fights disease, and builds hope by both engaging with those at the highest levels of government and working side by side with people in need of help. The Center’s Web site is www.cartercenter.org.



The Hon. Jimmy Carter and his wife Rosalynn Carter

The world is well aware of the work you do as an individual – overseeing elections, mediating crises, and so forth – but fewer people know what The Carter Center does. What are its principal functions?

The Carter Center has one basic premise, which is that we don’t duplicate what other people do. If the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Health Organization, the U.S. government, or Harvard University is adequately caring for a problem, we don’t get involved in it. We just fill vacuums in the world. Since I left the White House, this has led us into a wide range of commit-

ments, primarily among the people who suffer the most, are the most neglected, and are the most in need. We now have programs running in 65 countries, and it’s not an accident that 35 of those are in Africa. I would say that two-thirds of our total budget is spent in the field of health care: attempting to eradicate, eliminate, control, or prevent the most horrible diseases in the Third World. We are tackling five diseases in particular – Guinea worm disease, river blindness, trachoma, schistosomiasis, and lymphatic filariasis, known as elephantiasis – and we’ve adopted that as a major commitment.

What about AIDS?

No. We have been involved in the AIDS issue, but, as I mentioned, we don’t duplicate what others are doing. For instance, when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation wanted to start addressing the subject of AIDS, my wife and I went on a trip all the way around the periphery of Africa to help them decide how best to address the problem. So we help with the AIDS issue when we can, but at The Carter Center, we concentrate on diseases that are basically ignored by others.

In addition, we consider nutrition to be part of health, so we work in that area also. We run a program with several hundred thousand small farmers in Africa, each of whom has only about two acres of land. We teach them how to increase their production of basic grains – primarily corn or maize, wheat, rice, sorghum, millet, and things like that. We don’t deal with cash crops like cotton.

While we’re in those countries, teaching families about health and nutrition, we are able to help with other types of problems too. For example, the country may have a totalitarian government but may want to become a democracy for the first time. Or there may be a fragile democracy

in place that's in trouble. In such cases, governments can call on The Carter Center to help them with elections. We've just completed our 52nd election, which happened to be in Indonesia. My wife and I

nations, or, unfortunately, with Israel and other countries in the Middle East. But I do have a lot more influence in the poorest and most troubled countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia.

and get to know them, rather than ignore their very existence.

The last African country we visited was Mali, where 70 percent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day. For an American, it's hard to imagine how you could possibly pay for food, shelter, and clothing with just a dollar a day. And when you think about it, you soon realize that there would be nothing left over for health care, education, self-respect, or hope for the future. These are some of the problems we try to address through The Carter Center. Whenever we see a vacuum – in Washington, among the academic community, or in the international institutions – in dealing with a particular problem, The Carter Center feels an urgent commitment to try to fill that vacuum.

It seems that the United States is disliked in many countries around the world, but particularly in the Middle East.

More than ever before in history, I think.

Is there anything The Carter Center can do to help dissolve that feeling of hatred among citizens of the Middle East?

When I was president, I negotiated the only permanent peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. Not a word of that agreement has been violated in more than 25 years. And for a number of years, when President Reagan was in office, I went to the Middle East regularly to deal with the different elements there: the Israeli government, the Palestinians, the Jordanians, and Lebanese, and so forth. We don't do that anymore. I have offered my services, and the services of The Carter Center, to help search for a peace agreement in the Middle East. But, in the current political climate, we are not likely to be involved.

I believe that there is a sense throughout the Muslim world – in fact, throughout the entire world – that the United States is committed to the Israeli point of view more now than ever before in history and is ignoring the plight of the Palestinians. This has been one of the factors stimulating animosity toward the United States. I hope that we'll see some improvement in the months ahead, but I have serious doubts about it.

It's impossible to force a country to become democratic. How does The Carter Center promote democracy, and what needs to be in place for democracy to take hold?

Each year we get numerous calls from governments around the world asking us to monitor their elections. We can only deal with about five elections per year, because of limited time and funds. That type of project is very costly. When the people of a country, or the opposition party, are demanding democracy, the last thing a ruling party wants, in almost every case, is for the U.S. government to get



The Carter Center founded by the Hon. Jimmy Carter

will soon be going to Mozambique to help with another election. Additionally, we offer mediation services in the case of civil war. Through those activities, we can try to create a world at peace. That is the basic thrust of The Carter Center's work.

It must be tremendously expensive to run such projects.

It is.

How is the center funded, and how can people help?

Well, we have to raise funds for every project. We have an annual budget of about \$40 million in cash, and we get large contributions from corporations of an in-kind nature, especially for our efforts to prevent disease. Dupont has given us cloth filters for villagers to strain Guinea worm larvae from their drinking water, and Merck & Company gives us all the medicine we need to treat river blindness, and so forth. That amounts to more than our cash contributions. And, of course, Rosalynn and I serve without any salary, and if I make a speech and get a nice fee, then quite often that money goes to The Carter Center. But, primarily, we get our money from donors whom we contact. We present our agenda, and if people have an interest in helping us achieve a goal, they contribute money to it.

Through all of these projects, do you think you have more influence in the world today than you did when you were president?

My influence is now indirect. I don't have as much influence as I used to have with the Soviet Union or with European

You mentioned your mediation work. What are The Carter Center's most important peace initiatives?

We need to acknowledge that the biggest challenge the world faces in this new millennium is a growing chasm between rich people and poor people inside a country, and between rich nations and poor nations. This situation creates a breeding ground for disenchantment, hopelessness, despair, and a lack of self-respect. Correctly or incorrectly, afflicted people often lash out at those whom they hold responsible for their plight. So we try to alleviate suffering, and we try to explain to people how they can get along with each other. This inequality can be blamed not only for the numerous civil wars taking place all over the world, but also for the animosity and hatred that has built up in much of the Third World against the United States. We are identified as insensitive to people's needs and as partially responsible for their suffering.

How can this situation be turned around?

Well, it's a great challenge, because for the last 100 years or so, the gap between rich and poor people has been growing. And when that gap grows, not only do the poor people resent their plight all the more, but the rich become insensitive to what is going on in other parts of the world. We ignore the plight of poor people. We even ignore their existence. We live in an encapsulated, and very profitable, beneficial, and blessed society. We need to reach out to others

involved. The next-to-last thing they want is for the United Nations to get involved. So they turn to a non-governmental entity like The Carter Center. We don't have any authority at all; the only authority we have is our moral authority. Governments in Third World countries know that we care about their people because of our health and agricultural programs. Nevertheless, we go in with certain prerequisites. For instance, the election must be held on a nationwide basis, and a politically balanced commission must be set up to supervise the voting. Then we help guarantee that the election is honest, fair, transparent, and safe. As I mentioned earlier, we've just completed our 52nd election.

To refer back to the previous question, we have monitored elections in the Middle East. We monitored the Palestinian election in January 1996, and that election was completely honest, completely fair, and completely safe. There was no violence anywhere in the West Bank, Gaza, or East Jerusalem when the Palestinians elected the members of their governing authority and chose Arafat to be their executive leader.

Considering the scope of your work and all the problems in the world, what is your greatest frustration?

I would say it was our inability to promote, in international circles, an awareness of the needs of Third World people, and the benefits that can accrue in the industrialized world if we share a small part of our wealth with them. Even the most generous countries – Norway, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands – devote only four-tenths of 1 percent of their gross national product to foreign aid. The United States gives about one-fourth as much as that – about one-tenth of 1 percent. If we could just increase that to 1 percent, it would make a profound difference to the problems and plight of the Third World. It would alleviate suffering and engender beneficial trade both ways, and would lead to a dramatic reduction in the inclination of those poverty-stricken people to resort to violence. I think that would be a wonderful and beneficial investment for the world to make.

You and President Ford are close friends, aren't you?

Yes, indeed. When we celebrated the 200th birthday of the White House, part of the program was an analysis of history. During that analysis, two historians said that never before had two former presidents been such close friends as Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. That was the most memorable comment of a delightful evening, and one that I will always cherish.

That's quite amazing, since you defeated him.

That's true, but we soon got over that. Now, when we're riding from one place to another together, to get to a public event,

both of us hate arriving because we've enjoyed being with each other so much. Gerald Ford has helped my work at The Carter Center in a lot of ways too. Whenever we are near where he is, either in Vail [Colorado] or California, Rosalynn and I always try to go by and see him and Betty. Rosalynn and Betty are very close friends as well. Rosalynn deals with mental health, and Betty deals with substance abuse. They sometimes join together and go to Washington to lobby for their own particular interests. So we have a very close family relationship.

You are known as someone who enjoys the simple life. You've never been ostentatious. What is your greatest extravagance?

We take off an adequate amount of time each year just to enjoy life. In fact, my latest book, which happens to be my 19th, is called *Sharing Good Times*. I really believe that every person, no matter how driven or ambitious they are, ought to take time off to savor the joys, pleasures, and fun of life. So we take some time off every year to do that. We go fly fishing around the world. We climb mountains. We go skiing. We take some time to be with our grandchildren and our children. We also go bird watching. We just have a good time. I don't look at that as an extravagance, although it takes time away from my work.

One of the things we do, and have done for the last 15 years or so, is take our entire family – there are about 23 of us – on a very interesting trip somewhere in the world during the week after Christmas, and we pay all the expenses. That binds us together as a family, but maybe it could be seen as an extravagance.

Do you take them skiing?

I took up skiing when I was 62 years old. I didn't intend to, but our family wanted to go on a ski trip. Rosalynn and I were going to sit around the lodge, enjoying the fireplace and reading books. That lasted about two hours after we got there. We went to Taos in New Mexico, and our grandchildren started saying that we were too old to deal with them anymore and so forth. So before we knew it, we were out on the ski slopes. Rosalynn was 59, I was 62, and we have enjoyed skiing ever since.

And you've never gotten too old to ski?

Not yet. I just passed 80, but I hope I'll be skiing again in February. The Carter Center holds an annual ski weekend event to raise money for the center and promote our programs. So we ski every year with our friends.

Much has been made of the strong and loving relationship President Reagan had with his wife, Nancy. But you and Mrs. Carter have been an equally strong team, and, even though you don't express it in so many words, your marriage is a fabulous love story.

That's right. I never told any woman

but Rosalynn that I loved her. I knew I wanted to marry her on the first date we ever went on, and we've been married now for 58 years. We share everything. Rosalynn is an equal partner with me in The Carter Center, and, in addition, she has a worldwide commitment to enhancing mental health. In fact, that's an important part of the Carter Center's agenda, too.

They say that patience is an important factor in a marriage that long. You two must be very patient, because you're both strong-willed people, and yet you get along so well.

We've learned to give each other space. We don't try to dominate one another. I have to say that in the early years of my life, I was rather a dominant person. I had that inclination. But we've learned to live side by side, and if Rosalynn has a special project, I try to help her with it without interfering and vice versa. We also made a commitment many, many years ago that we would never go to sleep with any sort of disagreement outstanding between us. So we always reconcile our differences at the end of each day.

There are many young people who look at the world of politics and decide they never want to get involved. What would you say to young people today to inspire them to do something worthwhile in life?

I think the main thing to remember is that no matter what your primary commitment in life is, always try the ancillary things – the extra things that don't interfere with your major commitment, but can enhance it. These activities have a tendency to also expand your heart and mind to encompass other people, which add a new dimension to life. So I would urge young people to try new things. Don't restrict your lives. Don't live encapsulated in a cocoon with people just like you, who speak the same language, look the same, sing the same songs, or worship the same way. Instead, continually explore new ideas and new experiences.

Is it really worth going into government?

I think so. I have never seen an incompatibility between my fairly brief public service and the other elements of my life that I enjoy. I think they have been mutually enhancing.

I still look forward to some more years of fruitful and enjoyable life. I think the best years of my life, as far as enjoyment and fulfillment are concerned, have been those since I left the White House. But serving as the president of perhaps the greatest – and certainly the most powerful – country in the world has opened up avenues of experience and service to me that I would never have known otherwise. So I'm very grateful for having served as president. Nevertheless, my best years have been the ones in what most people would call my retirement. I was 56 years old when I left the White House, but the last 24 years have been the best years of my life. ●