

## ARGUMENT

# The Real Jimmy Carter

America's 39th president was not the weak and ineffective leader of popular caricature. But Barack Obama could still learn from his failings.

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BY **BETTY GLAD** | JANUARY 21, 2010, 8:00 PM

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**T**he hottest new trend of 2010, it seems, is making half-baked comparisons between Jimmy Carter and Barack Obama. Writing in **Foreign Policy**, historian Walter Russell Mead **warns us**, "[T]he conflicting impulses influencing how [Obama] thinks about the world threaten to tear his presidency apart — and, in the worst scenario, turn him into a new Jimmy Carter." There are some real similarities between the two U.S. presidents, it's true. Both men came to office following deeply unpopular Republican presidencies and were outsiders with relatively little national security experience. Both had to depend heavily on their staff for policy advice and direction. But beyond these superficial observations, the comparisons are generally based on the conventional wisdom that Carter was an idealistic but weak president.

The reality was far more complex than that. Carter had a number of notable foreign-policy successes — the return of the Panama Canal, the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China, and

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Getting both sides to sign the accords was undoubtedly Carter's crowning achievement, and he invested his full prestige in the job. Displaying the intense attention detail for which he was often mocked, Carter personally led the negotiations and absorbed all the facts relevant to Israeli and Egyptian concerns about settlements, airfields, and oil reserves in the Sinai. Israeli Prime Minister Menachim Begin noted at the signing of the accords that "the president took a great risk for himself and did it with great civil courage."

So why is Carter remembered today as a dithering weakling? He may have cemented his own legacy in the history books after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, when he ill-advisedly told Frank Reynolds of ABC News that the event had "made a more dramatic change in my opinion of what the Soviets ultimate goals are than anything they've done in the previous time I've been in office." The statement, as Hedley Donovan, a distressed senior adviser later wrote, opened Carter up to the charge of political "naiveté." The charge has continued to dog his legacy ever since.

The president's statement to Reynolds was an instance of his tendency to exaggerate. Carter had never been "soft" in his views of the Soviet Union. At the 1972 Democratic Convention, he led the "Anyone But McGovern" movement and even nominated the uber-hawkish Washington senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson for president. A reference to the Soviet Union as a "warlike power" in the 1974 speech announcing his own run for the presidency was dropped only after one of his aides told him the phrase sounded too "Jacksonian."

It's also unlikely Carter was surprised by the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. After all, it was he who first authorized U.S. covert operations to aid the mujahadeen the summer of 1978. And in the fall that

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If anything, Carter could be too aggressive with Moscow, and it may have undermined his efforts to reach a deal on atomic-weapons reductions. His first proposal for deep cuts in both powers' nuclear arsenals would have asymmetrically limited Soviet land-based missiles, without corresponding U.S. cuts. Not only that, he unveiled the proposal in a speech before the U.N. General Assembly and then announced increased funding for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty shortly before Secretary of State Cyrus Vance was to present the U.S. arms-reduction proposals at a conference to be held in Moscow in spring 1977. Additionally, he invited Soviet dissidents to meet with him at the White House over Kremlin objections. In these instances, Carter went against the advice of the outgoing secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, who warned that confronting the Soviets directly over their human rights violations would be counterproductive. At the Moscow meeting, the Soviets dismissed Carter's proposals, and an embarrassed U.S. team went home empty-handed.

Eventually, the Carter administration embraced what then CIA Director Stansfield Turner described as a "series of policies on nuclear weapons that laid the whole foundation for Reagan's expansion of nuclear weapons, and war-fighting, and war-winning capabilities." He pushed plans to develop the MX first-strike missile system, proposing that it be made mobile by running the warheads on a rail network linking a series of silos in Utah and Nevada. After cancelling deployment of the neutron bomb, he backed a new medium-range nuclear system in Europe that could reach Soviet territory. He also increased the defense budget by 5 percent.

That same year, following National Security Advisor Secretary Zbigniew Brzezinski's advice, Carter moved the U.S. into a more prominent role in the Middle East. He promoted security agreements with

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used against new Soviet incursions around the world. Brzezinski even suggested calling the proposal the "Carter Doctrine.

Carter also provided somewhat better management of the Iranian hostage crisis than he is usually given credit for. He did make mistakes in admitting the shah into the United States, hyping the issue for almost six months and launching an ill-fated rescue mission. But he avoided the temptation for military action, and skillfully used the Iranian assets he froze in the United States as a bargaining chip to secure the hostages' release. His efforts were eventually successful and the fact that the plane carrying the American diplomats only left Iran right after Ronald Reagan was sworn in office was just a final bit of Iranian defiance.

If his opponents remember him for his purported weakness, Carter's supporters often hold him up as a rare president who made the promotion of peace and international morality a centerpiece of his foreign policy. But Carter's legacy in the field of human rights is actually quite mixed. His concerns were not evident during the U.S. civil rights movement. In fact, Carter, as a state senator in Atlanta, sat on the sidelines during civil rights marches, which occurred in nearby Americus and Albany in the mid 1960s. When he ran for governor in 1970, he criticized his opponent, Carl Sanders, for praising Martin Luther King, Jr. and promised that he would not seek the "block" vote, subtly slurring the word so that it sounded like "black." It was only after he was elected governor that he became a vocal opponent of racial discrimination. Carter's deeper commitment to human rights more likely emerged from the exigencies of the 1976 presidential campaign than from prior conviction. International human rights, as his advisor Stuart Eizenstat advised him at the time was an issue that would unite disparate factions within the

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Democratic Party: Baptists in the south, Americans of Eastern European ancestry, and members of the Jewish community.

During his term in office, Carter spoke a great deal about human rights and the United States did act in accordance with international and national legal obligations. But this campaign was mainly employed as a public relations tool against the Soviet Union. Other despots got off relatively easy. Carter never put meaningful pressure on Chilean strongman Augusto Pinochet, a staunch anti-communist. He never campaigned on behalf of dissidents in the Peoples' Republic of China, an equally, if not more repressive regime than the Soviet Union. Nicolae Ceausescu, Romania's brutal dictator, was welcomed at a White House dinner in 1978 and that country held "Most Favored Nation" status throughout Carter's presidency. Even critiques of Cambodian dictator Pol Pot were muted after Soviet-allied Vietnam invaded his country to end one of the most brutal genocides in modern history.

Most tragically, Carter's early embrace of Soviet human rights giant Andrei Sakharov was not accompanied by support for another heroic figure, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. Rather, as documented for the first time in my book, *An Outsider in the White House*, the administration sought the help of John Paul II to quiet the archbishop's outspoken opposition to a government supported by the United States, but loosely tied to right-wing death squads. Without U.S. or papal backing, the archbishop became an easy target for an assassin's bullet. He was murdered while saying mass in San Salvador in March 1980.

Like Carter's, Obama's presidency will face complications. As a Nobel Peace Prize laureate whose most

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recognized moral standard. Carter had to face the fanaticism of Khomeini and an aroused Iranian people. Obama must deal with the Islamist extremism inspired by Osama bin Laden, and the temptation will always exist to address such problems through military action. Obama acknowledged as much in his Nobel address. But the prudent statesman, as Carter discovered, will know that the decision to use force always places a nation onto morally uncertain terrain in which power is limited and losses may sometimes have to be absorbed. Despite the many challenges that arose during his presidency, Carter avoided putting the United States in that position. This was not weakness; it was shrewd statecraft, and a worthy example for Obama to follow.

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