

Reassessing the Carter Administration 40 Years Later

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Review of Jonathan Alter's "His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, A Life" (Simon & Schuster, 2020)

The first ever book-length biography of our 39th president, Jimmy Carter, is an illuminating and fascinating portrait of a much underappreciated man. Jonathan Alter's "His Very Best: Jimmy Carter, A Life" makes a compelling case that Carter accomplished a great deal in his four years but that these successes have been lost in the recriminations over the Iran hostage crisis, Carter's personality faults and the malaise that gripped America in the late 1970s.

Alter paints a portrait of an intensely driven man—an engineer by profession who disliked playing politics. We learn of the paradoxes and contradictions in his life story. He was the only modern American president who did not play golf, but he was a genuine fan and friend of the Allman Brothers and Bob Dylan. He campaigned for governor of Georgia along typical segregationist lines in the Deep South and then stunned his inauguration audience by announcing the time for "racial discrimination" was over in the state. He was the most pious president in decades but was a firm believer in the separation of church and state. Above all, Carter was a

decent and honest man who routinely took on the hardest and most unpopular issues because that is what he believed was the president's job.

Carter was the first president I ever met. It was just before the 1978 Camp David summit with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Carter came to CIA headquarters, and I was part of the briefing team to help prepare him for the summit. I was just 25 years old and had been at the CIA for just over a year. Carter was focused on Begin, whose election to prime minister had been a surprise for the agency the year before. Carter wanted much more information on Israel.

The Camp David agreements were undoubtedly his biggest accomplishment in diplomacy. And he had to do it twice: first in September 1978 at the presidential retreat in Maryland and then again shuttling in the region when the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty seemed destined for failure in March 1979. It was Carter's stubborn refusal to give up that made the treaty a reality. It was very much a

personal achievement. Alter brings new information to the story from the private diary the first lady kept at Camp David.

The treaty has prevented a full-scale Arab-Israel war for four decades now and effectively eliminated the existential threat to the survival of Israel. In doing so it also reduced the incentive for Israel to make a deal with the Palestinians. Carter spent much of his time after the White House promoting the Palestinian cause, to little avail, probably out of remorse about the treaty's failure to bring a comprehensive peace. He was often very critical of Israel. Less well known is that Carter's administration also set in process the creation of the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C.

Carter was also the president who negotiated the return of the Panama Canal to Panama despite the vociferous opposition of the American right wing led by Ronald Reagan. As Alter rightly argues, this probably averted a long guerrilla war that would have pitted the United States against all of Latin America and cost tens of thousands of lives. Today it is a forgotten triumph of his remarkable persistence in painstakingly gaining the support necessary in the Senate to ratify the treaty, which Reagan never challenged in his presidency.

Iran defined Carter's presidency, first with the unprecedented revolution that toppled the shah and then with the hostage crisis prompted by Carter's decision to allow the shah to come to the United States. Carter had not wanted to let the shah in—he presciently asked his advisers repeatedly what would they do if the embassy was seized and our diplomats were taken hostage. No one had an answer.

A collection of Americans led by Henry Kissinger, calling themselves Project Eagle, lobbied for the shah to come from his exile in Mexico. But they had no answer to Carter's question either. The shah was poorly examined by incompetent doctors

who claimed he needed access to U.S. medical facilities when everything was available in Mexico. Carter relented, the shah came to New York and the 52 American hostages spent 444 days in captivity. The president looked feckless. The doomed rescue attempt, which never had any chance of success, only added to the president's problem: There was no option to free the hostages except with the Ayatollah Khomeini's consent.

I was assigned to the Iran Task Force in the CIA in November 1978, replacing the team that had said the shah would easily outwit the Islamic Revolution and the Ayatollah. I wrote the first comprehensive assessment of the Ayatollah. In the summer of 1979, the agency warned the White House that the embassy would be overrun if the shah was admitted to America. After the embassy fell, we told the president that military action against Iran would lead to the hostages' execution and an open-ended war in the Middle East in a country nine times larger than Vietnam. After the disaster of George W. Bush's war in Iraq, Carter's decision against the large-scale use of force looks eminently wise.

The crisis consumed Carter. Ultimately the hostages were released because the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980—which would lead to the deaths of a million and a half people—forced the Ayatollah to focus his attention on Baghdad and not Washington. Algeria played a crucial role in mediating the final deal that brought all the hostages home alive. Carter's successors in the Reagan administration would later foolishly barter arms through Israel to the Iranians to fight Iraq in return for the release of American hostages held by the Iranians allies in Lebanon. The arms-for-hostages debacle only created more hostages.

Carter deserves more credit for his reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan than the book gives him. Within days after the Soviet invasion, Carter had devised the strategy of covertly arming the mujahideen

from Pakistan and created the alliance of the Saudis, Pakistanis and Americans that would be the victors eight years later. Less than two weeks after the Russians seized Kabul, the CIA delivered the first arms for the Afghans to Karachi. It was a brilliant performance but was kept top secret for years as a covert operation.

Years later I met Carter in Atlanta to interview him for my book “What We Won: America’s Secret War in Afghanistan, 1979-1989.” I told him that he deserved credit for the strategy that defeated the Soviets and ended the Cold War. He graciously gave me access to his private diary, in which he recorded the decision-making process behind the scenes in the winter of 1979-1980.

Carter was the first world leader anywhere to recognize the problem of global warming. His administration issued multiple reports on the danger of climate change. He doubled the size of the National Park

System. He passed more legislation than any of his successors.

Joe Biden was the first senator to endorse Carter in 1976. Biden will confront challenges in Iran and Afghanistan that have their origins in the Carter administration. Jonathan Alter has given us a well-written and superbly researched biographical study of how Jimmy Carter handled his challenges 45 years ago.

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