
Jimmy Carter: A Moral Hero (*Student Essay*)

Danny Haidar
(Utica Academy for International Studies)

Abstract. *Following the end of Jimmy Carter's first and only term as President of the United States, historians scrambled to put his presidency in the proper context. More than thirty years later, Carter has become associated with failed presidencies. To be compared to him is to be insulted. Even so, Jimmy Carter has had one of the most prolific, philanthropic post-presidential lives of any former American president. This is inconsistent with the image of his single term in office that the media has painted—a good man should have been a good president. To better understand this irony, this investigation shall seek to answer the following question: how did Jimmy Carter's pre-presidential experiences affect his leadership as President of the United States of America (1977-1981)?*

This article will draw on apolitical, supportive and critical accounts of Carter's presidency, as well as Carter's own accounts of his beliefs and childhood experiences. While historians interpret Carter's life events differently, each interpretation reveals important influences on Carter's leadership in the White House.

I will argue that Carter held too tightly to his morals to be suited to presidency. Carter's childhood and pre-presidential political experiences created a man who was, indeed, unfit for the White House. The problem was less with his political vision than it was with his execution of that vision. Carter's tragic presidential tale serves as a reminder that moral malleability is a necessity in the highest office of a government.

INTRODUCTION

When Jimmy Carter is mentioned in American politics, he is used as an example of what not to be. Jimmy Carter has become the punching bag of the political right, exemplifying a failed liberal presidency. In a pre-election interview on NBC's *Nightly News*, Republican presidential candidate John McCain had the following to say about his opponent:

Obama says that I'm running for a Bush's third terms. It seems to me he's running for Jimmy Carter's second. (LAUGHTER)¹

The Democrats' instinct wasn't to reject the comparison's fundamental premise that Carter's second term would have been bad—it was to reject the comparison. This interpretation of Carter's presidency has become commonplace within modern political discourse. Instead, the Obama campaign team, with the Democratic Party behind it, responded by pointing out the differences between Carter and Obama.² Indeed, Carter's very own political party has accepted that the insult to modern politicians is more easily deflected than the insult to the good peanut farmer.

A mere three decades since Carter's presidential farewell, U.S. cultural memory has it that he was a failed president. Politically conservative historian Steven F. Hayward, F.K. Weyerhaeuser Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and Senior Fellow at the Pacific Research Institute, has praised conservative leaders. In his examination of the Carter years, *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators, and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry*,³ Hayward accused the former president of quixotic idealism. He argued that Carter wasn't enough of a realist to be president, and that Carter's moral compass too often pointed him in the wrong direction. On the other end of the political spectrum, politically liberal and revisionist writers Frye Gaillard and Douglas Brinkley assert that the former president had only good intentions, and should be given credit for that. Brinkley, history professor and director of the Eisenhower Center at the University of New Orleans, wrote an entire book about Carter's post-presidential successes titled *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey beyond the White House*.⁴ Brinkley used Carter's post-presidential successes to rectify the former president's reputation. Frye Gaillard, writer-in-residence for the History department at the University of South Alabama and winner of the Lillian Smith Book Award, wrote his own account titled *Prophet from Plains*.⁵ Gaillard asserted that Carter's "greatest asset [was also] his greatest flaw: his stubborn, faith-driven integrity",⁶ which put Carter in a more positive light. Carter himself admits to his steadfast commitment to his faith in his own account of his morals, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis*.⁷

¹ NBC News. "McCain: Obama means 2nd Carter term - First Read." *First Read*. Published June 9, 2008, Accessed September 2, 2013, http://firstread.nbcnews.com/_news/2008/06/09/4437354-mccain-obama-means-2nd-carter-term?lite

² Julian E. Zelizer. *Jimmy Carter: the 39th president, 1977-81* (New York: Times Books, 2010)

³ Steven F. Hayward. *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators, and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004).

⁴ Douglas Brinkley. "Preface: Citizen Carter." In *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey Beyond the White House* (New York: Viking, 1998).

⁵ Frye Gaillard. *Prophet from Plains: Jimmy Carter and his legacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jimmy Carter. *Our endangered values: America's moral crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

Some cite Carter as an idealist, whose quixotic aims led his presidency to ruin. Others argue that he was a man with good-intentions in the wrong place at the wrong time. Instead of relying only on the history of Carter's four years as president or his years of philanthropy that followed, this essay seeks to examine the challenges of the Carter presidency through the lens of Carter's pre-presidential experiences.

INVESTIGATION

Farming in Archery, Georgia, the Carter family lived in a rustic environment. The young James Earl Carter Jr. grew up with all of the boyhood responsibilities of a small-town farm. Earl Carter, the father of the would-be president, demanded much from his three children, not abstaining from physical discipline on occasion.⁸ As a result, Carter spent his childhood motivated to gain his father's approval.

Carter's childhood work ethic was refined by his experiences on the farm and—no doubt—by his relationship with his father. Earl Carter relied on tough love to catapult his son into manhood, which only intensified the young Jimmy's desire to please his father. Further, the young Carter learned to mask his anger toward his father by hiding behind his smile.⁹ Rather than birthing a Georgian, arm-twisting, Lyndon Johnsonesque politician, the atmosphere of Carter's childhood home created a man who was often unwilling to expose his inner feelings to advisers and legislators. Not necessarily creating a man with a permanent poker face, Earl's influence on the young Jimmy likely gave the president a constant reminder that he can never really succeed unless he performs perfectly.

Carter's rustic childhood didn't only frame his political challenges as opportunities for perfection, but also developed him into a fiercely independent problem-solver. Steven Hochman, a three-decade-long research assistant to the former president, explained in an interview that "[Carter] is very independent. If you grow up on a farm, you have to do things for yourself. When some problem comes up, he's used to solving it".¹⁰ This independence made Carter unlike many of his political peers. In his many political posts, it has been argued that Mr. Carter was less interested in listening to others than he was in trusting his own discretion. Indeed, Carter's maverick politics—the politics of self-induced isolation—were born from his time on the farm. To the young Jimmy—and to the 39th president—-independent problem-solving was more of a way of life than a way out of teamwork.

⁸ Julian E. Zelizer. *Jimmy Carter: the 39th president, 1977-81* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 8.

⁹ Kenneth Earl Morris. "An Imperiled Self and Search for Community." In *Jimmy Carter, American moralist* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 70.

¹⁰ Carole Cadwalladr, "Jimmy Carter: 'We never dropped a bomb. We never fired a bullet. We never went to war.'" *The Guardian*. Published September 10, 2012, Accessed August 31, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/11/president-jimmy-carter-interview>.

Before entering the political ring, Carter spent a few years as a nuclear engineer. Leaving Georgia to study at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Carter's competitive edge quickly surfaced. Francis Hertzog, one of his closest friends at Annapolis, recalled that "Jimmy just hated to lose...He wanted to be the best at whatever he did".¹¹ Enlisting in the Navy following his studies at Annapolis, Carter would go on to work under the then and still legendary Admiral Hyman Rickover as an engineer on a new nuclear submarine program. Zelizer posits that "all of these years as an engineer helped to shape Carter's approach to tackling issues. He developed a technical and managerial...mind-set to problem solving that would inform him throughout his career".¹² This pre-political career path sets him apart from most career politicians, who have traditionally been lawyers and business owners and managers.¹³ Carter's problem-solving methods isolated him from many of Washington insiders during his presidency. He didn't seem to understand the game of politics. His time as an engineer was in part responsible for his reputation as a political klutz.

Following Carter's promising naval career came his decisive time as a full-time peanut farmer in a segregationist community. After his father's death, Carter left the Navy to fill in the void left by his father.¹⁴ The family farm now became Carter's livelihood. Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, the segregationist White Citizen's Council attempted to enlist as many local white men as possible. When the local White Citizen's Council demanded that Carter join them, even threatening to boycott his farm's goods and consequently his livelihood, Carter stood his ground and refused. He rejected the status quo and was a maverick among prominent local white men. He accepted that he was one of the only nonmembers in all of Sumter County.¹⁵ To Carter, dissension was more of a rule than it was an exception.

With decades' hindsight, Carter reflected that his "commitment to human rights came, [he guesses], from [his] personal knowledge of the devastating effect of racial segregation in [his] region of the country".¹⁶ This admission is made even more poignant when one considers the obstinacy with which Carter approaches infractions of human rights. Incidents like the encounter with the White Citizen's Council display Carter's steadfast confidence in his morals and willingness to stand by them even when it jeopardized his very livelihood. Throughout his time in Plains, Carter consistently found himself on the moral high ground, even if that meant being in the moral minority. This, very likely, was an attitude toward morality that Carter carried with him throughout his life.

¹¹ Douglas Brinkley. "Preface: Citizen Carter." In *The Unfinished Presidency: Jimmy Carter's Journey beyond the White House* (New York: Viking, 1998), xii.

¹² Julian E. Zelizer. *Jimmy Carter: the 39th president, 1977-81* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 12.

¹³ David B. Magleby, Paul C. Light, and Christine L. Nemacheck. "State Legislatures." In *State and local politics: government by the people* (15th ed. Boston: Longman, 2012), 98.

¹⁴ Julian E. Zelizer. *Jimmy Carter: the 39th president, 1977-81* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Jimmy Carter. *Our endangered values: America's moral crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 8.

Carter's political acumen was very much developed by his early years in Georgia politics. The Georgian political system was riddled with corruption. Coming to prominence under such circumstances was the first hurdle over which Carter jumped, running into the Georgia political machine along the way. Carter dove into "the belly of the beast" and ran for a seat in the Georgia State Senate in 1962. Carter's opponent, a well-known local businessman, was an incumbent with the support of Joe Hurst, "one of the state's most powerful bosses".¹⁷ Carter narrowly lost the election because of Mr. Hurst's overt vote manipulation: "[d]ead men voted, 126 people voted in alphabetical order, and more votes were cast than there were registered voters on the rolls".¹⁸ Carter, an ever-tenacious man, challenged the incumbent's underhanded victory and demanded a recount. Miraculously, he marshaled enough media attention to shed enough light on the corruption to secure a seat in the senate.¹⁹ Carter's battle scars from this episode never healed, serving as a reminder that fellow politicians cannot always be trusted.

Carter entered the senate lacking not only a comfortable legislative alignment with the party system, but also lacking a comfortable alignment with the legislators themselves. During his first year as a state senator, Carter was unusually hardworking, even among his peers. Unusual for a Georgian senator, he "did not enjoy the horse trading and socializing that also constituted part of legislative life".²⁰ Such activities were proper for a senator to fulfill his duties fully. Unfortunately for him, he would maintain this asocial temperament through his political career. Hamilton Jordon, a lifetime political adviser and presidential chief of staff, noted that Carter didn't "understand the personal element in politics".²¹ Perhaps stemming from his tenure as a nuclear engineer, Carter was more interested in getting the job done today than he was in building relationships for tomorrow. Immersed in a political system that he presciently regarded as corrupt, Mr. Carter's belief that his way was the right way was galvanized during his senatorial stint. This, for better *and* for worse, was an attitude that he would long retain after he left the senate.

From the inception of his political career, Carter needed to work *against*, and not *with*, the political system to gain power. In his 1970 bid for governor of Georgia, "Carter's campaign focused on his promise to help the average Georgians, to make government more efficient, and to be responsive to citizen concerns".²² To the average Georgian voter, corruption was nearly synonymous with politics. Carter's appeal in this

¹⁷ Julian E. Zelizer. *Jimmy Carter: the 39th president, 1977-81* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 15.

¹⁸ Steven F. Hayward. *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators, and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), 29.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁰ Julian E. Zelizer. *Jimmy Carter: the 39th president, 1977-81* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 17.

²¹ Peter G Bourne. *Jimmy Carter: a comprehensive biography from Plains to post-presidency* (New York: Scribner, 1997), 206.

²² Julian E. Zelizer. *Jimmy Carter: the 39th president, 1977-81* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 23.

race was that he was antigovernment.²³ He was an outsider. When he won the gubernatorial race, he further refined his image as an outsider.²⁴ To combat the inefficiencies of Georgian government, one of Carters goals was to “streamline the state government by eliminating unnecessary agencies and centralizing control under the governor”.²⁵ Carter built a career on beating the system, redesigning the system, but not working with the system.

Governor Carter’s initiatives were noteworthy for another reason: they were difficult to label. This wasn’t unusual throughout Carter’s political career, as he often “refused to be pinned down by preconceptions of what a liberal or conservative should do”.²⁶ Since Mr. Carter spent much of his pre-Washington political career fighting against a corrupted political system, he developed his own set of beliefs that occasionally deviated from party platforms. He never felt the need to conform to the Democratic Party both within his state and within the nation. A political maverick from day one, Carter would have a particularly difficult time garnering support for his many legislative proposals from the people who had ultimate authority over them: the legislators. Because he never comfortably aligned with his own party, Governor—and President—Carter often hobbled across the chamber pigeon-toed.

This exploration would be incomplete without a discussion of Carter’s faith. In his 2005 book, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis*, Carter sheds light on his Christian faith and how it affected his presidency. In the introduction of the book, he admitted that “[his] own religious beliefs have been inextricably entwined with the political principles [he has] adopted”.²⁷ While religious beliefs often underpin many of the morals that politicians have, Carter’s religious underpinnings ran much deeper than most presidents’. Carter submitted that he “was born into a Christian family, nurtured as a southern Baptist, and [had] been involved in weekly Bible lesson all [his] life, first as a student and then, from early manhood, as a teacher”.²⁸ This level of intimacy with the church is nearly unparalleled in presidential history, as Mr. Carter even maintained his Bible lessons through his presidency.²⁹ For Carter, religion wasn’t merely a part of life—it was a way of life. Carter himself contends that one of his “most fervent commitments was to the complete separation of church and state”,³⁰ but his religion no doubt found its way into many of his ethical dilemmas while in office in ways few presidents had before experienced. In response to concerns about his private, religious beliefs conflicting with his political, secular duties, Carter submits the following:

²³ Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁵ Ibid., 25.

²⁶ Ibid., 24.

²⁷ Jimmy Carter. *Our endangered values: America's moral crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 6.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁹ Ibid., 24.

³⁰ Ibid., 18.

There were a few inconsistencies, but I always honored my oath to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.” For instance, I have never believed that Jesus Christ would approve of either abortions or the death penalty, but I obeyed such Supreme Court Decisions to the best of my ability, *at the same time attempting to minimize what I considered to be their adverse impact*.³¹ (Emphasis added)

Carter’s faith was the lens through which he examined the world. This isn’t a bias from which an actively practicing Christian can separate. To the researcher’s advantage, Carter wrote this analysis of his morality more than two decades after leaving office. His retrospection produced an honest self-assessment. For Carter, faith-based considerations were much less the expectation than they were the rule.

It might be said that Carter’s faith-based perceptions might have been compatible with those of the conservative right. Though Carter was indeed religious, he belonged to the religious Left—“a very different beast”.³² Carter supported many of the positions around which the Left rallied, such as environmental legislation, healthcare, and a dovish aversion to military intervention. Even so, Carter examined certain issues, such as abortion, through the same religious lens that the right would. These political incongruities made for a slightly awkward leader of the Democratic Party. Indeed, Carter’s religious identity made him more of an outsider once in Washington, standing between even him and his party.

One of the most heavily-criticized episodes of the Carter administration was the energy crisis of 1979. In the wake of the Iranian Revolution, Iran cut the world’s oil supply by two million barrels per day in December 1978. The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) took the opportunity to hike oil prices. OPEC quickly moved to 50% increases by the summer of 1979.³³ As a result, gas station lines spread and caused panic across the nation.³⁴ This sudden scarcity may not have been the fault of the president, but required him to soften the blow to the nation’s morale. As was, and still is, customary of an American crisis, nearly all matters of national concern fell on the president’s shoulders. Carter’s public response to the price hikes and station

³¹ Jimmy Carter. *Our endangered values: America’s moral crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 57.

³² Carole Cadwalladr, “Jimmy Carter: ‘We never dropped a bomb. We never fired a bullet. We never went to war.’” *The Guardian*. Published September 10, 2012, Accessed August 31, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/11/president-jimmy-carter-interview>.

³³ Steven F. Hayward. *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators, and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), 141.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

lines was to deliver what was to be known as the “malaise” speech.³⁵ Within the address, Carter’s moralistic underpinnings did more than shine through and in between each line. A few notable excerpts from the address are more than adequate to display this point:

It’s clear that the true problems of our nation are much deeper—deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recessions.

[A]fter listening to the American people I have been reminded again that *all the legislation in the world can’t fix what’s wrong with America.*

The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very *heart and soul* of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for the nation.

Our people are *losing that faith*, not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy.

The symptoms of this *crisis of the American spirit* are all around us.³⁶

(Emphases added)

Within these excerpts from the speech, Carter projected his own spiritual perception of the issue onto the nation. Instead of focusing on the nation’s crisis of oil, Carter focused on the nation’s crisis of confidence. He didn’t look to the typical explanations for the oil crisis, but instead relied more on faith and principles. What followed the address invited trouble: the purge of the presidential cabinet.

Following the “malaise” speech, the president ordered the pro forma resignation of his entire cabinet, with an additional twenty-three senior White House staff.³⁷ Though Carter would only accept five of the resignations, the purge was supposed to be an extension of the spirit of his recent address. The peanut farmer’s intentions fell on infertile soil. *Time* described it as “the most thoroughgoing, and puzzling, purge in the history of the U.S. presidency”.³⁸ It wasn’t only puzzling to the public, as Washington

³⁵ Steven F. Hayward. *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators, and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), 146.

³⁶ "Jimmy Carter's Full "Crisis of Confidence" Speech (July 15, 1979)." *YouTube*. Published May 2, 2012, Accessed September 8, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kakFDUeoJKM>.

³⁷ Steven F. Hayward. *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators, and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), 153.

³⁸ "Carter's Great Purge." *Time*, July 30, 1979.

legislators also had doubts about the purge.³⁹ *Time* also judged that “the house cleaning...provoked new doubts about Carter’s understanding of the federal government and about his own leadership ability”.⁴⁰ To Carter, an antigovernment change was a gesture of democratic faith, almost inviting the public into the White House to clean up the government personally. Similar to his time in Georgia, Carter regarded government officials as corrupt and inept. However, the same political machine that functioned in Georgia didn’t function in Washington. Carter’s purge suggested to the public not that he was tending to *the* government’s inadequacies, but that he was tending to *his* government’s inadequacies. He was responsible for appointing the officials from whom he requested resignations. Carter’s position as the appointer of these officials made the culpability mutual, and the public responded as such: “by end of the week, his approval rating had fallen back to the pre-malaise speech 25 percent”.⁴¹ This episode illustrates that though Carter’s moral rectitude may have been well-meant, its extremity was not well-taken.

Very likely the most nightmarish episode within Carter’s foreign policy was the Iranian hostage crisis. This incident tested Carter’s political acumen with both the public and his advisers. On November 4, 1979, “as many as three thousand militants who hated America for its support of the Shah poured across the [U.S.] embassy walls and took control of the compound”.⁴² Fifty-two American hostages became mere puppets in the theatre of an Iranian revolution, forcing the Commander-in-Chief to undertake a series of negotiations for their release.⁴³ This crisis would indelibly stain the Carter administration in its last year by undermining Carter’s legitimacy as Commander-in-Chief. Carter, a dovish head of the U.S. Military, refrained from the use of military force through each of the 444 agonizing days of the hostage crisis. This, Carter admits in a 2011 interview for *The Guardian*, “was not a popular thing among the public, and it was not even popular among [his] own advisers inside the White House. Including [his] wife”.⁴⁴ Instead of military intervention, Carter maintained a personal moral high ground through Operation Eagle Claw. Intended to be a peaceful alternative to hawkish force, the operation only made matters worse by ending in a

³⁹ Steven F. Hayward. *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators, and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), 154.

⁴⁰ “Carter’s Great Purge.” *Time*, July 30, 1979.

⁴¹ Steven F. Hayward. *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators, and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2004), 154.

⁴² Frye Gaillard. *Prophet from Plains: Jimmy Carter and his legacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 25.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁴ Carole Cadwalladr, “Jimmy Carter: ‘We never dropped a bomb. We never fired a bullet. We never went to war.’” *The Guardian*. Published September 10, 2012, Accessed August 31, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/11/president-jimmy-carter-interview>.

“terrible confluence of extreme circumstances involving a sandstorm in the desert and a helicopter crash, [in which] eight US servicemen were killed”.⁴⁵ Ironically, Carter’s attempt to preserve lives resulted in lives lost. To the public, this was an unacceptable failure. Indeed, it was accident from which his presidency would never recover.⁴⁶ Gaillard even held that without this accident, “[Carter may have been reelected] if [he] had been lucky—if, for example, a navy helicopter and C130 transport plane hadn’t collided in a swirl of Iranian dust”.⁴⁷ Even so, Carter would never regret his dovishness. The following excerpt from a 2011 interview with *The Guardian* illuminates how inextricably entwined the president’s morals were, and still are, with his leadership:

Rosalynn has been quoted as saying that, had her husband bombed Tehran, he would have been re-elected. [The interviewer] put this to Carter. "That's probably true. A lot of people thought that. But it would probably have resulted in the death of maybe tens of thousands of Iranians who were innocent, and in the deaths of the hostages as well. In retrospect I don't have any doubt that I did the right thing. But it was not a popular thing among the public, and it was not even popular among my own advisers inside the White House. Including my wife".⁴⁸

Carter’s current cost-benefit analysis perfectly illustrates the relationship between his morals and his politics: he regarded human life as infinitely more valuable than a political victory, making his failed rescue plan a small cost for the benefit of preserving tens of thousands of innocent human lives.

Also inconveniently occurring within Carter’s nightmarish final year in office was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Carter’s predictably diplomatic response was in the form of “a grain embargo, an Olympic boycott, and a backing away from the SALT II treaty”.⁴⁹ Despite all of these dovish and sincere efforts to halt the Soviet occupation, the Soviets continued with their mission anyway.⁵⁰ Carter once again affirmed the notion that he was willing to put his morals well above what was clearly more viable. Carter was by almost no accounts an unintelligent man. Indeed, it is conceivable that he consciously neglected the viable to uphold his principles. He led this nation as Commander-in-Chief with a set of bulletproof morals, even at the gunpoint of politics.

With his presidency three decades behind him, Carter proudly submitted that “[w]e kept our country at peace. We never went to war. We never dropped a bomb. We never

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Frye Gaillard. *Prophet from Plains: Jimmy Carter and his legacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 13.

⁴⁸ Carole Cadwalladr, "Jimmy Carter: 'We never dropped a bomb. We never fired a bullet. We never went to war'." *The Guardian*. Published September 10, 2012, Accessed August 31, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/11/president-jimmy-carter-interview>.

⁴⁹ Frye Gaillard. *Prophet from Plains: Jimmy Carter and his legacy* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 25.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

fired a bullet. But we still achieved our international goals".⁵¹ Carter's present perception of his single term suggests no pangs of regret for his moral obstinacy. Though he may not have been the president for the political system, he remained content with his decisions. It should come as no surprise that Carter holds his moral underpinnings in high regard. Carter didn't just massage the conventions of presidential moral fidelity – he rejected them. To his demise, his moral fidelity was incompatible with the jungle of Washington. It was incompatible with the jungle of American politics, but it wasn't incompatible with the farmland of Plains, a fact which Carter may have overzealously applied throughout the rest of his political career.

CONCLUSION

The collective American memory may be that Mr. Carter was a failed president. Some historians reduce his failure to mere political ineptitude. But the decisions made and patterns of behavior exhibited can be explained by Carter's pre-presidential experiences. Earl Carter's demands led his son to aim for perfection, even in the White House. Young Jimmy worked hard and independently to solve issues of personal relevance, and so too did President Carter to solve issues of international relevance. The Navy required Carter to solve problems systematically, and so too did he as president. The Baptist faith required that the weekly Bible school teacher preserve human life, and so too did President Carter by avoiding war. Perhaps Carter's biggest concern wasn't that he was unfit for command, but rather that he was too fit for command. The Oval Office requires an at least slightly malleable occupant, one who is willing to bend personal ideals. The 39th President was simply too rigid for office. Though it might be said that the White House's demand for malleability is only par for the course, there is a more important point hiding within this truism: moral malleability has always been a requisite to the American political tradition.

⁵¹ Carole Cadwalladr, "Jimmy Carter: 'We never dropped a bomb. We never fired a bullet. We never went to war'." *The Guardian*. Published September 10, 2012, Accessed August 31, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/sep/11/president-jimmy-carter-interview>.

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