

Jimmy Carter and the Carter Center “A Mini State Department in Downtown Atlanta”

By John Gizzi

Summary: Like other ex-presidents, Jimmy Carter wants to have a continuing impact on public affairs, and he has created the Carter Center to carry out his agenda. Much of the Carter Center’s work is deserving of high praise. Unfortunately, its achievements are undermined by its founder’s penchant for personal diplomacy and loose cannon advice.

Former presidents like Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton imagine themselves retaining their influence in foreign policy after they leave public office. That’s why they establish presidential libraries and create public policy centers dedicated to big ideas. Nixon reportedly envisioned world leaders seeking him out at his library, speaking at his policy forums, asking his advice and requesting his assistance for “back-channel” missions like those made famous by Henry Kissinger, his secretary of state.

But the Watergate scandal undercut Nixon’s planned post-presidential career, forcing Nixon to create a library without presidential papers. Only in 2007, after lengthy and often bitter controversy, did the library, located at Nixon’s birthplace in Yorba Linda, California, finally recover his papers and become part of the National Archives system of presidential libraries. A separate Nixon Center, which conducts public policy forums, recently shed the president’s name and renamed itself the Center for the National Interest. By contrast, the scandals of Bill Clinton’s life haven’t diminished the grandeur of his William J. Clinton Library and Foundation. Hosted by the gregarious ex-president, the



Clinton Foundation summons statesmen and billionaires to think deep thoughts at posh conferences on global development.

As former presidents, both Nixon and Clinton worked hard to overcome the stigma that surrounded their departures from office. They used their libraries and policy centers as vehicles for redemption.

The same might be said for Jimmy Carter. Most people don’t attack Carter’s personal character in the terms Nixon’s and Clinton’s enemies use. But many do fault Carter’s presi-

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gency, finding his leadership uninspired and ineffective. In 1980, when Ronald Reagan asked Americans, "Are you better off now than you were four years ago?" their answer sent Carter into retirement.

Still, the ex-president has enjoyed considerable acclaim in the years since he left office. In 2002, Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for "his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development." Former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo even dubbed him, "the nation's best ex-president."

In 1982, the ex-president announced he would establish a Carter Presidential Center. A National Archives-affiliated presidential library and museum, an auditorium, and conference rooms for public policy discussions and seminars were created on a 37-acre campus of buildings located on a hillside two miles from downtown Atlanta. The Carter Center has two principal programs: health and peace. The Center fights six preventable diseases that affect some of the world's poorest people, and it promotes democratic elections and international conflict resolution.

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Under the aegis of the center that bears his name, the 39th president, now 87 years old, travels constantly around the world with his wife Rosalynn. He attempts to mediate conflicts between political rivals, observes elections in emerging democracies, and prepares trip reports that make their way into many of the more than 20 books he has written since leaving office.

The late Dean Rusk, Carter's fellow Georgian and a U.S. secretary of state (1961-69), once characterized the Carter Center as "a mini-UN in downtown Atlanta." Perhaps a more apt description these days is "a mini-State Department in downtown Atlanta." Another observer who has dealt with the Carter Center is more critical: "It's the center for Carter foreign policy, not U.S. foreign policy."

It's unfortunate that Jimmy Carter's own outspoken views on foreign policy have overshadowed the achievements of the Carter Center in promoting public health and democratic elections. The former president maintained a convivial relationship with Yasser Arafat, head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and as early as the 1980s the Carter Center hosted seminars on a Palestinian state that fueled suspicion and animosity among friends of Israel. In 2006 Carter wrote *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, a book so critical of the Israeli occupation of territories acquired in the 1967 war that it caused 14 members of a Carter Center advisory board to resign in protest.

Carter's controversial conduct and foreign policy opinions led American Enterprise Institute fellow Steven Hayward to write a book critical of Carter's post-presidency. Its title rendered a judgment that was the opposite of Mario Cuomo's: *The Real Jimmy Carter: How Our Worst Ex-President Undermines American Foreign Policy, Coddles Dictators and Created the Party of Clinton and Kerry* (Regnery, 2004).

Creating "An Action Center"

Recalling his old boss's vision of building a presidential library that would do more than remember the past, former Carter aide Peter Bourne has written that the Carter Center

was intended to be more than "a think tank in the traditional sense, turning out position papers or learned treatises. It was to be an action center, where its direct intervention would influence events."

Rosalynn Carter recalled the precise moment her husband put this vision into words. Awakened in the middle of the night in January 1982, the former First Lady found Jimmy sitting up in bed.

"We can make it into a place to help people who want to resolve disputes," Carter told her, "If two countries really want to work something out now, they don't want to go to the United Nations and get 150 other countries involved. . . We could get mediators that both sides would trust, and they could meet with no publicity, no fanfare, perhaps at times in total secrecy. . ."

Carter initially had an uphill climb in raising money to finance his ambitious project. In 1982 the largest donation to the proposed Carter Center was \$50,000 from the liberal Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Former Carter chief of staff Hamilton Jordan told the *New York Times*, "The people who gave money to President Carter the winner were not interested in ex-President Carter, the loser."

However, within a year's time the Center's prospects improved as its fund-raising drive raked in more than \$10 million. Major contributors in the Center's early days (or "Founders") included Dwayne Andreas, chairman of Archer Daniels Midland; Richard C. Blum, president of Blum Capital and husband of Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D.-Cal.); Home Depot founder and Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur M. Blank and wife Diana; Seagram's heir Edgar M. Bronfman Sr.; high-fidelity entrepreneur Sidney Harman (deceased) and his wife, former Rep. Jane Harman (D.-Cal.); Atlanta broadcasting mogul Ted Turner; and former New York Gov. Averill Harriman and his wife Pamela, a Democratic Party fundraiser and future U.S. ambassador to France.

Other significant Carter Center donors included McDonald's heiress Jane Kroc, Oscar

winner Paul Newman (deceased), television producer and People for the American Way founder Norman Lear, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. The Atlanta business community weighed in with gifts from Turner Broadcasting, Delta Airlines, Coca-Cola, Home Depot, and United Parcel Service.

There were foreign donors too. They included the Sultan of Oman, the government of United Arab Emirates, and the Saudi bin Laden Group, headed by Bakr bin Laden, a brother of Osama. Among the largest of the early donors was Aga Hassen Abedi, president of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International (BCCI), who donated \$4 million in 1985 and an additional \$17 million three years later. BCCI collapsed in 1990 in one of the largest banking scandals in U.S. history—and it embarrassed former Defense Secretary Clark Clifford, who was involved with the banking colossus.

In 2004, author Steve Hayward noted: “The Carter Center’s current annual budget is more than \$35 million, and has accumulated an endowment of more than \$200 million. Carter has ensured that his activist legacy will long survive him.”

In 2009, the Center’s IRS Form 990 reported much higher income and assets. Income was \$82.4 million (down from \$110 million for the prior year and over \$180 million in 2006). The Center’s 2009 annual report lists over 120 individuals, organizations and nations that have made lifetime contributions of \$1 million or more, and 74 that gave the Center at least \$100,000 in 2009-2010. The Center’s net assets were \$421 million.

In recent years large donors to the Carter Center include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (\$82,640,435 since 2000), George D. Smith Fund Inc. (\$9,035,000 since 2001), Skoll Foundation (\$5 million since 2008), Annenberg Foundation (\$2,800,000 since 2000), W.K. Kellogg Foundation (\$1,039,454 since 2002), and George Soros’s Open Society Institute (\$956,834 since 2000).

The Carter Strategy

In 1984 President Ronald Reagan attended a ground-breaking ceremony for the \$26 million Carter Center and expressed his deep respect for the man he unseated. “I can think of no other country on earth where two politicians could disagree so widely yet come together in mutual respect,” declared Reagan, then a candidate for re-election, “For myself, I can pay you no higher honor than simply this: You gave of yourself to your country, gracing the White House with your passion and intellect and commitment.”

Carter graciously replied, “I think I understand more clearly than I ever had before why you won in 1980 and I lost.”

By 1986 the Center was open for business. Emory University, a highly-regarded private university in Atlanta named Jimmy Carter a University Distinguished Professor and entered into a partnership with the Carter Center. This affiliation is a key to understanding the unique nature of the Center and its founder’s intentions.

In *Second Acts*, a book on presidential legacies, author Mark Updegrave writes that for Carter the Emory partnership signified “an academic affiliation, without being reined in by government constraints, as would have been the case in partnering with a state university.” Jimmy Carter clearly wanted the Center to be free to act as what his friend Peter Bourne called “an action center, where its direct intervention would influence events” on the international stage.

Despite the warm words between the two presidents, the Reagan administration was careful to limit Carter’s opportunities for personal diplomacy. The administration, wrote Updegrave, “continued to shut Carter out for the remainder of Reagan’s tenure.” Carter, in turn, grew harsh in publicly commenting on his successor’s foreign policy. In 1985 Carter told a reporter for the TV news show “60 Minutes” that he “could not think of a single international or diplomatic achievement that’s been realized by Ronald Reagan.”

In the 1980s the Carter Center included Soviet officials at what it called “consultations” on arms control. At these sessions the ex-president often directed his ire at President Reagan’s proposed missile-defense system, the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). He called it “an absolute stupid waste of money” and “a scam.” Carter biographer Douglas Brinkley concluded that Carter “thought [Reagan] immoral to the core.”

“Opening a New Door for Me”: Panama and Nicaragua

When George H.W. Bush became president in 1989 Carter’s dealings with the White House changed dramatically. The White House welcomed the Carter Center’s role in monitoring international elections and verifying honest voting.

“It was like opening a new door for me,” Carter would later say. With cooperation from President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker (with whom Carter would develop a close relationship), the Georgian joined an international delegation to monitor elections in Panama in 1989 and in Nicaragua the following year. Carter and his Center would receive many more such assignments monitoring fledgling democracies around the world. As of 2010, the Carter Center proudly reports observing 86 elections in 35 countries, emphasizing that it “must be invited by a country’s election authorities and welcomed by the major political parties to ensure it can play a meaningful, non-partisan role.”

In Panama, the Carter Center’s role in observing its national elections was facilitated by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Democratic party affiliate of the federal government’s National Endowment for Democracy. Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega had earlier rejected NDI election observers, but “Noriega could not refuse entry to Carter,” observed NDI President Ken Wollack, “because of the Panama Canal Treaty.” In 1977 Carter had signed the treaty that turned the canal over to Panama.

NDI and its counterpart, the National Republican Institute, organized a team of 28 foreign election observers co-chaired by

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Carter and former President Gerald Ford. They concluded that Noriega had rigged the vote and stole the election from opposition candidate Guillermo Endara. “I can still remember President Carter getting up at 3:00 a.m. during the vote-counting, going to a polling place, and demanding to be let in,” said NDI’s Wollack, “and he blasted Noriega in a way no one else could.”

When Noriega declared martial law and dispatched tanks into the streets, a U.S.-led force deposed the strongman and brought him to the U.S. for trial. Curiously, Carter opposed the U.S. military strike against Noriega that his own strong statements precipitated. But Carter and the Carter Center are revered today in Panama, which has experienced two decades of free and fair elections.

The elections in Nicaragua also raised the stature of the Carter Center, bringing it worldwide recognition. Unable to depend on help from the Soviet Union, Nicaragua’s unelected Marxist strongman Daniel Ortega reluctantly agreed to elections in 1990, the first since his revolutionary Sandinista movement came to power more than a decade earlier. With full support from the Bush White House, Carter again led a U.S. observation team and the Carter Center began operating in Managua.

Carter had cultivated friendly relations with Ortega, who publicly called him “a good friend.” The two met at length during Carter’s trip to Nicaragua in 1986 and, a year later, Ortega was Carter’s guest at one of the former president’s Habitat for Humanity projects in New York. When the election results showed opposition candidate Violetta Chamorro beating Ortega in a stunning 55% to 41% landslide, it was rumored that Ortega was plotting to stay in power. Carter was credited with pressuring Ortega to relinquish power and not contest Chamorro’s victory.

For the next decade, the Carter Center became known for its work promoting democracy. The former president, who turned 70 in October 1994, would play a post-presidential role as an intermediary in the politics of the Middle East, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and

the former Yugoslavia. Veteran *Washington Post* foreign affairs correspondent Don Oberdorfer wrote in 1997, “[T]he successful broker of the Camp David accords in the Middle East carved out for himself a mission of promoting peaceful resolution of conflicts through his Atlanta-based Carter Center.”

For instance, the Carter Center convened meetings in Atlanta to mediate talks between the Mengistu dictatorship in Ethiopia and insurgents in Eritrea waging a separatist war against it. The sessions didn’t end the war but they paved the way for the eventual independence of Eritrea. Similar Center-run sessions between warring factions in Sudan helped bring about a string of cease-fires in that war-torn nation.

The Carter Center’s work for conflict resolution and free elections brought it much acclaim. Many in the press hailed Carter’s role in free elections in Zambia in 1991 and Indonesia in 1999. The Center’s “seal of approval” was sought out by newly-elected governments that knew the Atlanta group was sponsored by a former president of the United States who commanded massive media attention.

“A Foreign Policy Meddler With Renegade Tendencies”

Praise was heaped on Jimmy Carter and the Carter Center for their work in election monitoring. But when the ex-president began to engage in what looked like freelance diplomacy, the Center came in for heavy criticism. In the words of Mark Updegrove, many thought Carter was becoming “a foreign policy meddler with renegade tendencies.”

In 1994 Carter visited North Korea and met with its supreme leader Kim il-Sung. The Clinton administration was so upset by the private meetings that one official called the ex-president’s actions “near traitorous.” Carter ignored constraints and warnings from the Clinton White House, freely discussed North Korea’s nuclear arsenal with Kim, and did nothing to restrict news coverage of his meetings.

In his book *The Two Koreas*, Don Oberdorfer wrote, “When Kim il-Sung agreed to the temporary freeze and to keep the international inspectors and monitoring equipment in place, a relieved Carter told him he would recommend that the U.S. government ‘support’ North Korea’s acquisition of light-water [nuclear] reactors.” Carter later allowed CNN to interview him about his session with Kim. Recalled Oberdorfer, “to the consternation of the White House team, the press saw Administration officials as bystanders while a private citizen, former President Carter, appeared in control of U.S. policy.”

Carter engaged in similar “lone wolf” brokering of a cease-fire agreement in Bosnia. He told the notorious Bosnian-Serb leader Radovan Karadzic: “I cannot dispute your statement that the American public has had primarily one side of the story.” Carter was widely excoriated in the American press for saying this. After all, Karadzic was the architect of ethnic cleansing. He later went underground for 14 years until he was captured and tried for genocide by the International Criminal Court.

In Haiti, Carter was an administration-backed negotiator for the return of deposed President Jean Bertrand Aristide. He negotiated an agreement which provided that military junta leader Gen. Raoul Cedras would leave office in favor of a restored Aristide. However, Carter’s terms were far more generous than those announced by President Clinton who had warships poised for an invasion should Cedras refuse to step down. Back in the U.S., Carter gave an unexpected interview to CNN in which he defended Cedras’s right to remain in Haiti. This led to a shouting match between Clinton and Carter behind closed doors. Later the two men jointly met the press to proclaim the end of the Haitian crisis.

Carter’s actions in Haiti, Bosnia, and North Korea show a private citizen prepared to conduct foreign affairs independently of his own country’s government. Should the Carter Center bear the onus for its founder’s actions? Carter’s trip to North Korea was financed by the Ford Foundation, not the Carter

Center. In Haiti, Carter was fully-authorized to speak on the U.S. government's behalf, but he implied that he would sit in judgment were the Clinton administration to authorize an invasion of Haiti. Carter told CNN, "The problem last night and in a number of places around the world causes it to be necessary for the Carter Center to act."

After 1995, the Clinton administration never sanctioned another foreign mission by Jimmy Carter.

"The Other Stuff"

While Jimmy Carter's involvement in resolving foreign conflicts has earned him much criticism, the Carter Center has won much praise for its work in health including mental health (a passion of Mrs. Carter's since she was First Lady of Georgia), hunger and agriculture—"the other stuff," as one foreign policy hand put it.

Guinea Worm Disease. The Carter Center, working with international health organizations and health ministries in Africa, has helped distribute household water filters and larvicides to exterminate water fleas that carry the larvae for guinea worm disease. This potentially fatal disease struck an estimated 3.5 million people in Africa and Asia in 1986, but by 2002 only 1,800 cases were reported. The Carter Center's action has reduced incidents by 99.5 percent.

River Blindness. This infectious disease, which afflicts millions of people in Africa and Latin America, has caused blindness in 270,000 and left a half-million visually impaired. Between 1996 and 2002, the Carter Center provided drugs to those infected and at risk of blindness. (Figures from "Highlights of 20 Years of Achievement," The Carter Center, 2002). Onetime Carter White House staffer Anne Wexler, who joined the board of the Merck Corporation, is credited with securing the pharmaceutical company's contribution of 29 million tablets of Mecticzan, which cures the disease and prevents blindness.

The Carter Center has helped over four million small-scale farmers in Africa learn

improved farming methods and the Center's Child Survival Program works with UNICEF and the World Health Organization to promote child immunization.

From its earliest days the Carter Center has also promoted health care at home. The former president, who has outlived his younger brother and two younger sisters, notes that all three were heavy smokers who died before they were age 65. The Carter Center sponsors health policy conferences on tobacco use as well as work in the area of mental health, a longtime concern of Rosalynn Carter.

Beyond Jimmy Carter

Presidents who are defeated for re-election often make great contributions after they leave office. William Howard Taft, defeated in 1912, went on to serve with distinction as Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Herbert Hoover, badly defeated in 1932 and reviled for years as the overseer of the Great Depression, won back much of the nation's respect for his humanitarian relief work after World War II and his service as chairman of commissions to make government more efficient.

So it might seem with Jimmy Carter, whose Carter Center has earned much acclaim at home and abroad. Carter has acknowledged the Center's good relationship with the White House under George H.W. Bush. But he admitted to an interviewer a few years ago that it "had practically no relationship with President Clinton when he was in office nor with the current President [George W.] Bush."

Under Barack Obama this may have changed. We know that Carter supported Obama over Hillary Clinton in the race for the Democratic nomination for president. In my capacity as a White House correspondent, I spotted Carter walking into the White House West Wing on December 1, 2010. When I asked press secretary Robert Gibbs what Carter was doing there, Obama's top spokesman replied: "I believe his schedule had a meeting with our National Security Advisor and I believe the president also asked President Carter to drop in." Gibbs gave no further details of

Carter's meeting with the president.

The Carter Center's work monitoring overseas elections continues to be widely praised. However, its major problem, as has long been the case, is the pronouncements and actions of its founder. In recent years, Jimmy Carter's statements and private acts of diplomacy in the Middle East have enraged many in the Jewish community. Besides the statements in his book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, Carter has met on a number of occasions with leaders of Hamas, which the U.S., Israel, and the European Union consider a terrorist group.

With its \$400 million plus endowment, the Carter Center already has leadership succession plans in place. Most Carter-watchers believe the successor to Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter is likely to be their eldest grandson, Georgia State Sen. (and Center Board member) Jason J. Carter.

As for Jimmy Carter, the ex-president has said that the Carter Center is his "major legacy," and all signs are that it will be going strong long after he is gone.

John Gizzi is the political editor for Human Events, a weekly Washington news journal.

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Many thanks.

Terrence Scanlon
President

BrieflyNoted

Leaders of the resurrected radical group **ACORN** are lobbying the **Obama** administration in what appears to be a concerted effort to game the electoral system to help Democrats, new evidence suggests. At least five ACORN leaders have visited the White House this year alone. One of those ACORN officials, **Estelle Rogers** of **Project Vote**, has been involved in vetting Department of Justice hires who may help to enforce the voter fraud-enabling National Voting Rights Act.

The Obama administration has showered its allies at **ACORN Housing**, which changed its name to **Affordable Housing Centers of America**, with at least \$729,849 in 2011 despite massive accounting irregularities at the longtime ACORN affiliate. Watchdog group **Cause of Action** obtained an audit from taxpayer-funded federal nonprofit **NeighborWorks America** showing ACORN Housing had poorly trained staff, extraordinarily sloppy accounting procedures, and violated conflict-of-interest guidelines laid down by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

Capital Research Center contributor **Trevor Loudon** warns in a column at the Big Government website that the radical Occupy Wall Street movement, whose encampments in cities across America have largely shut down, will be back in full force in the springtime. The movement, backed by Big Labor and infiltrated by anti-American extremists, will return “stronger, more disciplined and even more militant.”

America’s leading training institute for radical leftist agitators, the Chicago-based **Midwest Academy**, gave a lifetime achievement award to Congressman **Barney Frank** (D-Mass.). Frank, arguably an architect of the mortgage market collapse, has decided not to seek reelection this year. Frank has an “incisive mind and sharp humor” and has been “a progressive partner and champion for decades,” said the school. Midwest Academy was founded by 1960s radical **Heather Booth**, a huge fan of the socialist father of modern community organizing, **Saul Alinsky**.

Serious health and safety violations plague Head Start centers across the nation, according to a report by the Department of Health and Human Services’s Inspector General. The federal government provides Head Start grants to nonprofits and other organizations to provide services to poor children. Of those grant recipients studied, most did not properly conduct criminal and background checks and close to 90 percent of the facilities had toxic chemicals within reach of children. Above 70 percent of the facilities had open or broken gates and more than 50 percent had playground equipment in a poor state of repair.

A delighted **NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund** announced that Philadelphia prosecutors have dropped their bid to have convicted cop killer **Mumia Abu-Jamal** executed. Abu-Jamal, a former journalist who has become a revered icon on the far left, is a member of the Black Panthers who was convicted of the 1981 execution-style murder of Philadelphia police officer **Daniel Faulkner**. Abu-Jamal is expected to have his sentence reduced to life imprisonment.