

JIMMY CARTER

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Jimmy Carter's election as President of the United States in 1976 heralded a new era after the ordeals of Vietnam and Watergate. His emphasis on human rights was intended to signal a return to traditional American values, although the tension between his attempt to capture the public imagination and the need to maintain a flexible foreign policy resulted inevitably in compromise. His human rights policy has nevertheless endured, and its influence can be seen in the words and actions of all his successors.

James Earl Carter Jr. was born on 1 October 1924 in Plains, Georgia, the son of James Earl Carter Sr., a farmer and businessman, and Lillian Gordy Carter, a nurse. Both parents were staunch Southern Baptists, and the church was a strong influence on Carter, as was his mother's commitment to racial integration. He was educated at Plains High School, Georgia Southwestern College, and the Georgia Institute of Technology. He married Rosalynn Smith in 1946; that same year he also graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis in 1946 and became a submariner, rising to the rank of lieutenant. After his father's death in 1953, Carter returned to Plains with his wife to run the family farming and warehousing business. His political career in Georgia began on boards and committees in Sumner County, and he later served as a Democrat in the state senate. In 1970 Carter was elected governor of Georgia, holding that office until 1974.

Road to the White House

For a man whose Presidency is synonymous with human rights, Jimmy Carter was slow to embrace the issue. Some Democratic congressmen, led by Donald Fraser of Minnesota, had been agitating since 1973 for bans on U.S. aid to repressive regimes, but the future president took several years longer to take up the baton. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. noted, for example, that the phrase "human rights" did not appear in the foreign policy chapter of Carter's 1975 memoir *Why Not The Best?* If anything, Schlesinger noted, Carter "seemed to be moving in the opposite direction" by criticizing the Helsinki Agreement and the philosophy of foreign intervention (p. 513). At meetings to decide the Democratic Party's platform in the upcoming 1976 presidential election, Carter's team remained peripheral to the discussion of the issue. One participant, Patrick Moynihan, recalled that while the backers of George McGovern and Henry "Scoop" Jackson had strong views, Carter's were "at best neutral, giving the impression of not having heard very much of the matter" (p. 19).

By 1976 Carter was beginning to make up lost ground on the issue, having noted how his factional rivals were using human rights issues to attack the perceived amorality of the Republican administration. As one of his advisors noted, the incumbents lacked a "moral underpinning", and this created "a vacuum, and an environment where this issue would be very important" (Drew, p. 36). Carter expressed concern about covert American actions in Cambodia, Chile and Angola, and proposed a different ethical approach to that set out by then President Gerald Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. In this respect Carter was far from unique, as almost every presidential hopeful from "Mo" Udall to Ronald Reagan proposed some kind of moral foreign policy. Indeed, it was precisely this new cross-party consensus that gave human rights concerns such a boost.

Carter thus raised the issue during his acceptance of the Democratic nomination in July, and returned to the theme at a B'nai B'rith convention two months later. (He was drawn to it, speechwriter Patrick Anderson argued, "because it put him on high moral ground and... promised to win him friends among Jewish leaders", even though at that stage he did not have "deep emotional concern" for the plight of Russian Jews and political prisoners [p. 102.]) During a pre-election television debate with President Ford, Carter accused the Republicans of ignoring human rights, although the point was overlooked by journalists, who were more interested in Ford's curious claim that "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford Administration" (*Time*, p. 19).

The "big idea"

Carter won the Presidential election with the promise of a new beginning, and now he had to deliver. There was a pressing need for positive policies, and in the months that followed the Democratic Party's inner circle looked increasingly to human rights. The party pollster Patrick Caddell reported that the issue pushed the right buttons with the electorate, because it appealed to both liberals, who saw it as a harbinger of progressive change, and conservatives, who embraced it as a return to core values. It also had the benefit of uniting factions within the Democratic Party and morally outflanking the Republicans. With Cold War anti-communism on the wane during the *détente* years, it was an alternative "big idea" that seemed to offer a morally satisfying antidote to the mid-Seventies American malaise.

"Our commitment to human rights must be absolute," declared Carter in his 20 January 1977 inauguration speech. A few days later he was presented with a perfect opportunity to display this commitment when Andrei Sakharov complained to him about Moscow's persecution of Soviet dissidents. Carter wrote back that America would "promote respect for human rights not only in our country but also abroad" – a bland statement that nonetheless provoked anger in Moscow (Boyd, p. 196). The State Department also pushed the new policy. During the first month of Carter's administration, it censured the Czech government for harassing dissidents, Idi Amin for his rule of terror in Uganda, and Ian Smith's white minority government in Rhodesia. It also announced sanctions against Argentina, Uruguay and Ethiopia on human rights grounds.

Carter described such actions as being in line with the "basic concepts on which our country was founded 200 years ago", and reactions from both the public and fellow politicians were positive. George McGovern and Barry Goldwater both congratulated the President on his stand, as did Henry Kissinger, who wrote that after "the traumas of Vietnam and Watergate", Carter had given Americans "a renewed sense of the basic decency of this country" (p. 60). Pundits also embraced the new credo. As Ronald Steel wrote in June 1977:

The good grey liberals on the *New York Times* love it; so do the Freidmanites on the *Wall Street Journal*. Senator Henry Jackson thinks it's made in heaven, and the hitherto-ignored members of Amnesty International hope that at last it may be coming down to earth. The hawkish neo-conservatives at *Commentary* and the dovish leftists at the *New York Review* have found one issue on which they can agree on – almost. Who can bad mouth human rights? It is beyond partisanship and beyond attack. (p. 14)

Carter had stumbled on the issue of human rights during the election campaign, and as he acknowledged in his 1982 memoir *Keeping Faith*, “I did not fully grasp all the ramifications of our new policy” (p. 148). Nevertheless, the new government took full advantage of opportunities that presented themselves. One official admitted that there was no strategy, but “fate intervened – happenchance things, letters – that blew the issue up unexpectedly” (Drew, p. 41). As Carter’s chief of staff Hamilton Jordan noted, one great benefit was that, alone among the administration’s foreign policy initiatives, it was not considered to be “liberal” and thus provided “broad-based, non-ideological support for our foreign policy” (Dumbrell, p. 118). In the process it helped to restore the credibility and resolve of the elite and improved America’s self-image. As Carter publicly declared in 1977: “It re-establishes our country, I think, as kind of a beacon light for a principle that’s right and decent and compassionate.”

As well as these domestic benefits, human rights also provided the United States with a medium through which to renegotiate its relations with the developing world. In previous decades, Washington had been preoccupied with the threat of radical insurgencies, and given priority to relationships with autocratic anti-communist regimes. The thaw in the Cold War meant that Carter was able to pursue a more nuanced approach by maintaining relationships with dictatorial allies and encouraging them to implement domestic reforms. To this end, he strengthened the State Department’s human rights bureau, headed by Patricia Derian, which agitated for improvements abroad.

Policy shifts

The first signs of trouble with the human rights policy came in March 1977, just two months after Carter’s inauguration. When Congress raised a bill calling on the United States to use its “voice and vote” against loans to dictatorships by international financial institutions, Carter opposed it on the grounds that it would tie the administration’s hands. Such restrictions, he argued, would remove his ability “to bargain with a foreign leader whom we think might be willing to ease off on the deprivation of human rights”. It was a hard case to make after the grandiloquent statements that had preceded it, and it laid him open to accusations of bad faith.

This was not the administration’s only problem. In addition to a restless Congress at home, it faced an obdurate Soviet leadership abroad. Not wishing to jeopardize the strategic arms limitation talks that were in progress, the administration decided to change tack. From summer 1977 onwards, it eased off on criticisms of the Soviet bloc’s human rights record, largely confining them to the “Helsinki” negotiations at Belgrade. At the same time, it shifted the human rights focus onto selected Latin American countries, which were more susceptible to U.S. pressure. This move was not universally popular. As one disappointed American human rights advocate noted, the government risked “dividing the world into two categories: countries unimportant enough to be hectored about human rights and countries important enough to get away with murder” (R. Cohen, p. 244).

The administration initially claimed that it would improve the human rights situation in Latin America and elsewhere by the judicious manipulation of aid. But sanctions did not produce the required result: the amount of aid cut was small, and the diplomatic costs were high. Not only that but the affronted governments of Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Uruguay soon found alternative supplies of arms, development

funds, and credit. This failure to bring about change prompted another change in direction. Henceforth, U.S. officials spoke less about halting specific abuses, and more about improving America's image by distancing itself from dictatorships. As Carter announced in September 1978, "We are no longer the best friend of every scurrilous, totalitarian government on Earth."

The inconsistencies of Carter's policy soon provided ammunition for critics. Some accused the administration of attacking the Soviet Union (or Rhodesia, Cuba, Chile, China, and others) too much, others too little. Some alleged that it was more willing to denounce the powerless than the powerful. They also fixed on the president's willingness to parley with the leaders of friendly but brutal regimes, such as the Shah of Iran, President Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, or President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire. (Carter's 1977 toast to the Shah for creating "an island of stability" in the region was soon to acquire a deeply ironic ring). Whatever the political orientation of the critics, their argument was the same: that the government was deploying human rights selectively and for its own purposes.

Some also noted that the administration paid lip service, but little more, to human rights laws that had been recently enacted by Congress. Jo Marie Greisgraber of the non-governmental Washington Office on Latin America was not alone in arguing that it had "acted against the intent of the human rights legislation... by stretching loopholes beyond any common sense definition" (House Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations, p. 155). In 1982, former official Stephen Cohen confirmed the truth of this claim. Citing the example of Section 502B of the Foreign Assistance Act, which banned security assistance to repressive governments, he wrote that the administration had in some cases "adopted a highly strained reading of the statute, which... produced a result contrary to Congressional intent", while in others "the language was simply disregarded, so that decisions violated even the letter of the law" (p. 264).

The political price

Carter effectively discarded his human rights campaign once the costs became too great. His noisier diplomatic forays abroad had alienated both enemies and friends, including, as he admitted, "the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, South Korea, Argentina, Chile, Brazil, the Philippines... and other countries". He was also hemorrhaging support on Capitol Hill, where some argued that the policy was undermining trade, and others that it was jeopardizing security. As Carter said in 1979, "There are always delegations who come to me... and say, 'This particular dictator has been a valuable ally of ours, and when the United States makes a critical remark about political prisoners... it tends to shake our relationship with that country'." In fact, Carter had sacrificed neither trade nor security to human rights, but that was not the way it seemed to opponents and eventually to the electorate at large – and this was what ultimately counted.

By the time the Iranians took the American hostages in November 1979 and the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December, the president had more or less abandoned the issue of human rights except as a stick with which to beat Teheran or Moscow. Furthermore, his administration pursued policies that actually contributed to repression in several countries, including Cambodia, where it backed Khmer Rouge against the Vietnamese-

backed government after 1979; and South Korea, where it reportedly released Korean troops under U.S. command to put down the Kwangju uprising in 1980.

Carter's commitment to human rights was not purely rhetorical, however. His government halted military aid to Argentina, Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Uruguay, and reduced economic assistance to Thailand, Afghanistan, and Morocco. Yet while the administration repeatedly polled Americans about the policy, it remained silent about its effects on the supposed beneficiaries abroad. The president himself was notably vague, stating that the United States could not take credit for specific improvements. This failure to capitalize frustrated Carter's colleagues. The influential House Democrat Dante Fascell, for example, complained that "regular, periodic *assessment of results*... was lacking in the Carter administration, and made the [human rights] policy unnecessarily vulnerable to criticism" (House Subcommittee on Human Rights and International Organizations, p. 48).

It fell to others to conduct a post-mortem on Carter's actions overseas. A 1981 Congressional Research Service report by Stanley Heginbotham observed that, despite some marginal improvements in a few countries, the record abroad in the late seventies was 'hardly encouraging'. A 1989 study by David Forsythe suggested that, while sanctions may have ameliorated abuses over time, they usually provoked a demonstrable "negative reaction" when first imposed (p. 181). And in 1987, David Carleton and Michael Stohl concluded that during the period 1976-1983, there was at best "no statistical relationship" between U.S. aid and human rights and at worst "a significant negative relationship; that is, the more abusive a regime, the more aid received" (pp. 1002-1003).

Carter's legacy

Carter's elevation of human rights to prominence within U.S. foreign policy endured well beyond his presidency. An early indication of its influence occurred in the first six months of Ronald Reagan's administration. The new Republican president attempted to distance himself from Carter by provocatively nominating Ernest Lefever – an academic who believed the United States had no business exporting rights – as the head of the State Department's human rights bureau. But the nominee was decisively voted down by the Republican-dominated Senate Foreign Relations Committee, thus proving that the appeal of human rights crossed party lines. The conservative academic Joshua Muravchik later conceded that in this respect at least, "President Carter had wrought a lasting change" (p. xviii).

Since leaving the White House in 1981, Carter has continued to be a prominent advocate for human rights. The Carter Center, which he headed until 2005, runs programs devoted to upholding rights, mediating conflict, and eradicating disease. Over the years Carter has drawn attention to abuses in many places, including Chechnya, Colombia, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uzbekistan. Although many of his initiatives have operated with the tacit support of the State Department, he is not averse to criticizing aspects of American policy, such as when he called for the closure of the Guantánamo Bay prison facility. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

[See also: Afghanistan; Idi Amin; Cambodia; Carter Center; Foreign Policy; Donald Fraser; Helsinki Accord and CSCE/OSCE; Iran from 1979; Palestine; Andrei Sakharov; and South American Southern Cone: National Security State, 1970s-1980s.]

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