
Our Worst Ex-President

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MORE THAN a quarter-century after completing his term of office, James Earl Carter is still to be found in the thick of debates about national policies on a range of issues: nuclear arms, Iraq, North Korea, and, especially, the conflict between Israel and the Arabs. A steady stream of books and articles continues to issue forth from his pen, and he travels the world on self-selected diplomatic missions. No other former President has chosen to play a similar role. But then, Carter's whole political career has been out of the ordinary. In order to understand the man today, it is necessary to see him in the light of his past.

In 1976, when Carter tossed his hat into the ring for the presidential nomination, the Democratic party was still deeply riven by the long, bitter debate over the war in Vietnam. Carter's response was to soar above these divisions, downplaying both ideology and issues. Instead, he put himself forward as a man of piety and character who would restore a high tone to government in the aftermath of Watergate and related scandals. Before the rise of politically-oriented televangelists, Jimmy Carter made his personal experience as a "born again" Christian into a key tenet of his platform. "I can give you a government that's honest and that's filled with love, competence, and compassion," he pledged.

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When the scramble for the Democratic nomination began, Carter was widely seen as a long shot. But by the time the primary season was half over, he had left the other, better-known Democratic contenders in the dust. That he was able to compete with them at all—that is, to raise money and enlist volunteers—owed to the national exposure he had received for his inaugural address as governor of Georgia in 1971. At that time, with much of the South still clinging to Jim Crow and resisting the nation's new civil-rights laws, Carter had boldly declared that "the time for segregation is over."

Yet the path that led him to that dramatic moment was a tortuous one, known to few outside of Georgia, and it shed light on the man who five years later would be promising voters across the country: "I will never lie to you."

CARTER RAN for governor of Georgia against Carl Sanders, who had served in the post previously, earning a reputation as one of the early "Southern moderates." (Georgia law prohibited serving two terms consecutively.) In the campaign, Carter presented himself as, in his words, "a local Georgia conservative Democrat . . . basically a red-neck." This formulation was calculated to convey a message about his stand on racial issues: a message of resistance to racial integration, if not of out-and-out racism. He reinforced the same message by making a campaign stop at a whites-only private school, and by promising to invite Alabama Gover-

nor George Wallace, the champion of segregation, to address the state legislature.

Topping it off was Carter's reaction when, as a result of the Democratic gubernatorial primary, Lester Maddox emerged as his running mate. Maddox, a restaurateur and Sanders's successor as governor, had gained notoriety by distributing to the customers of his whites-only establishment ax handles with which to batter any blacks who might seek to be served there. Carter took the pairing in stride, characterizing Maddox as "the essence of the Democratic party."

But no sooner had he won office than he executed his remarkable shift on race, a move that landed him on the cover of *Time* as the apotheosis of the "new South" and made him a nationally recognized figure. The cause of this about-face is still a matter of conjecture. Since he was barred from running for re-election, it is possible that he was already weighing a presidential run and thinking in terms of a national audience. Or he may have long harbored liberal views that he had deliberately concealed. In any event, one of his associates later explained that it was Carter's *way* to "run conservative and govern liberal." He was soon to put that formula to use again.

In pursuing his party's 1976 presidential nomination, Carter not only kept his ideological profile low, he also made it blurry. On Vietnam, for instance: as governor, he had had no need to say much about the war, but what he did say seemed none too dovish, especially his ardent defense of Lieutenant William Calley, a Georgian convicted of the slaughter of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. In the 1976 primary campaign, Carter distanced himself from the passel of doves—Congressman Morris Udall, Senator Frank Church, former New York Mayor John Lindsay, among others—competing for the mantle of George McGovern, leader of the antiwar Democrats. Instead, he stressed his background as a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and, because he had served on a nuclear submarine, as a disciple of Admiral Hyman Rickover, the "father of the nuclear navy."

At the same time, though, he took pains to position himself somewhat to the dovish side of Senator Henry "Scoop" Jackson, the hero of the Democratic hawks. In particular, he denounced the Jackson-Vanik amendment that linked trade privileges for the Soviet Union to freedom of emigration. In a 1975 speech blaming Jackson for a Soviet crackdown against emigration, Carter sounded a theme that echoes in some of his pronouncements to this day:

I think that the so-called "Jackson Amendment" was ill-advised. . . . Russia is a proud nation, like we are, and if Russian Communist leaders had passed a resolution saying that they were not going to do this or that if we didn't do something domestically, we would have reacted adversely to it.

AS THIS episode suggests, Carter was also initially cold to the subject of human rights. His 1975 book, *Why Not the Best?*, issued as a launching pad for his presidential campaign, makes no mention of it. Nor did he utter a word about human rights during the 1976 primaries. It was only in the course of hammering out the Democratic party's platform that his interest was kindled. By that time, with the nomination in hand, Carter's overriding goal was to unite his fissiparous party for the general election. With the Jacksonites animated against Communist regimes and the McGovernites against rightist ones, a possible common ground emerged. As Carter's chief speech writer, Patrick Anderson, explained, human rights "was seen politically as a no-lose issue. Liberals liked human rights because it involved political freedom and getting liberals out of jail in dictatorships, and conservatives liked it because it involved criticisms of Russia."

Not only was the subject a common denominator among Democrats, it helped Carter to put his Republican opponent, incumbent President Gerald Ford, on the defensive about the "realist" policies of his administration and especially of his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. As the *New Yorker's* Elizabeth Drew reported: "Human rights was an issue with which you could bracket Kissinger and Ford on both sides. . . . [I]t was a beautiful campaign issue, an issue on which there was a real degree of public opinion hostile to the administration."

On Kissinger's advice, Ford had refused to receive the novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, the most famous Soviet dissident, upon his expulsion from the Soviet Union. In an ironic reprise of his gubernatorial campaign promise to invite George Wallace to speak to the Georgia legislature, Carter now announced that he would invite the Russian writer to the White House. He also caught Ford in a fatal gaffe when, in their televised debate on foreign policy, the incumbent declared that "there is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe." Ford probably meant that he would not recognize Soviet domination there, but whatever he had in mind, he sounded hopelessly

naive, and Carter pounced. The effect was that by election day, Carter was positioned as tougher on Communism than Ford.

But just as he had once reversed himself dramatically on the subject of race, so now, upon his election as President, Carter began at once to lay the groundwork for foreign policies that were the opposite of those he had led the voters to believe he intended to pursue. This was made manifest even before his inauguration as he went about staffing his administration. George McGovern was quoted as saying that most of Carter's State Department appointees were "quite close to those I would have made myself." Meanwhile, Carter excluded the Scoop Jackson wing of the party almost entirely from his administration. His surprising tilt away from anti-Communism was made explicit in his first major foreign-policy address when he proclaimed: "we are now free of th[e] inordinate fear of Communism. . . . We've fought fire with fire, never thinking that fire is better quenched with water."

IT DID NOT take long for Carter to discover that he was in a quandary. The idea of quenching fire with water expressed his most cherished goal, namely, achieving reconciliation with states with which America had been at odds and thus laying to rest the legacy of Vietnam, perhaps even ushering in an era of peace on earth. However, the Communist and other radical leaders with whom he was hoping to find comity happened to represent most of the world's most implacably oppressive regimes. This contradiction was never resolved, imparting an uneven and sometimes hypocritical quality to the human-rights advocacy with which Carter became identified.

The effect was exacerbated by one of Carter's personality tics, strange in a man who boasted so often of his honesty: a compulsion to engage in flattery. At times, this could manifest itself toward a rightist ally like the Shah of Iran. Just months before the outbreak of the revolution that culminated in his toppling, Carter declared in a toast that Iran was an "island of stability" thanks to the "love which your people give you." But the impulse expressed itself most strongly toward leftist strongmen. Carter hailed Yugoslav dictator Josip Tito as "a man who believes in human rights" and as a "great and courageous leader" who "has led his people and protected their freedom almost for the last forty years." Visiting Poland, then ruled by the Stalinist hack Edward Gierek, he offered a toast to its "enlightened leaders" and declared that "our

concept of human rights is preserved in Poland . . . much better than other European nations with which I am familiar." He outdid himself in receiving Romania's iron-fisted ruler, Nicolae Ceausescu, enthusing:

Our goals are the same, to have a just system of economics and politics, to let the people of the world share in growth, in peace, in personal freedom, and in the benefits to be derived from the proper utilization of natural resources. We believe in enhancing human rights. We believe that we should enhance, as independent nations, the freedom of our own people.

Carter's weakness for dictators and his courtship of America's enemies not only clouded his human-rights policy, it also contributed to a flaccid approach to security issues, thus adding momentum to America's strategic decline following defeat in Vietnam. In several corners of Africa, Asia, and the Western hemisphere, Communist or other radical regimes took power, spearheaded by revolutions in Iran and Nicaragua.

Finally, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, Carter seemed to acknowledge his error. If he himself had once flattered Communist dictators, and if Cyrus Vance, his Secretary of State, had asserted that Soviet and American leaders "have similar dreams and aspirations about the most fundamental issues," now Carter struck a contrary note. The invasion, he said, "made a more dramatic change in my own opinion of what the Soviets' ultimate goals are than anything they've done in the previous time I've been in office."

But these second thoughts came too late to assuage American voters, and in 1980 they turned Carter out in favor of Ronald Reagan. The margin of loss was one of the widest of any incumbent President in our history.¹

FEW MEN who are called to politics suffer defeat gladly, and Carter was certainly not one of the exceptions. The last election he had lost was his first run for governor of Georgia, and it deeply shook him; as he would later relate, it was in the course of struggling to right his mood afterward that he experienced the epiphany of being born again. The loss this time was even more devastat-

¹ In percentage terms, the degree of Carter's rebuff was exceeded only by Herbert Hoover's loss to Franklin Roosevelt in 1932 at the depths of the Great Depression; William Taft's loss to Woodrow Wilson in 1912 (when Theodore Roosevelt split the Republican vote); and John Quincy Adams's loss to Andrew Jackson in 1828.

ing. In 1966 he had been a forty-one-year-old politician who knew he could try again. But now he had already reached the pinnacle, only to be found wanting. The political process offered little prospect of redemption.

Nonetheless, he has striven for it mightily ever since. The effort began in the early years of his post-presidency with highly publicized activity aimed at reestablishing his credentials as a man of piety. Enrolling as a volunteer with the group Habitat for Humanity, he posed for news photos hammering nails into the timbers of homes being built for the needy. Political coloration seeped into this mission only when it took him to Communist-ruled Nicaragua, where he posed with the Sandinista dictator Daniel Ortega.

Carter was not content, however, with doing good works. In 1982 he oversaw the founding of the Carter Center at Emory University, which he still heads with the assistance of his wife Rosalynn. Although it employs some academics, the center is devoted not to scholarship but to activism. Its declared purpose is “to prevent and resolve conflicts, enhance freedom and democracy, and improve health.” It provides the institutional support necessary for Carter to carve out a permanent albeit unofficial role for himself in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.

Some of the center’s activity has been non-controversial—like its missions, usually led by Carter in person, to monitor elections in countries where democracy is not yet firm. But other aspects—notably, Carter’s frequent pronouncements on issues of the day and his free-lance diplomacy—have had a much sharper edge. He has injected himself into several foreign crises, sometimes with the grudging acquiescence of existing U.S. administrations but sometimes in open defiance of them.

One remarkable instance grew out of Carter’s strong opposition to the use of force to reverse the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990. Not satisfied with issuing a torrent of statements and articles, he dispatched a letter to the heads of state of members of the United Nations Security Council and several other governments urging them to oppose the American request for UN authorization of military action. In this letter, writes Carter’s admiring biographer Douglas Brinkley, he

urged these influential world leaders to abandon U.S. leadership and instead give “unequivocal support to an Arab League effort, without any restraints on their agenda.” If this were allowed to occur, Carter believed, an Arab solution would not only force Iraq to leave Kuwait

but at long last also force Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories.

The U.S. government under President George H.W. Bush learned of Carter’s missive only from Prime Minister Brian Mulroney of Canada. Brent Scowcroft, Bush’s National Security Adviser, called it “unbelievable” that Carter would “ask . . . the other members of the Council to vote against his own country. . . . [I]f there was ever a violation of the Logan Act prohibiting diplomacy by private citizens, this was it.” Later, Carter justified his action by noting that he had sent the letter to President Bush, too—as if this disposed of Scowcroft’s point. And even that was only a half-truth. As Brinkley reports, the copy to Bush was dated a day after the letter was sent to the others.

Despite Carter’s appeal, the Security Council voted 12-2 to authorize military action, with only Cuba and Yemen taking Carter’s side. But this was not the end of the ex-President’s efforts. Just days before the announced deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, Carter wrote to the rulers of America’s three most important Arab allies in the crisis—Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia—imploping them to break with Washington: “I urge you to call publicly for a delay in the use of force while Arab leaders seek a peaceful solution to the crisis. You may have to forgo approval from the White House, but you will find the French, Soviets, and others fully supportive.” This time, he did not share a copy of his appeal with his own government even after the fact.

Why, one may ask, was Carter so adamant on the point of “an Arab solution”? After all, the so-called “Carter doctrine,” which he had laid down in his 1980 State of the Union address in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, explicitly threatened war in circumstances similar to those created by Saddam’s naked aggression in the Persian Gulf. What, then, led him to take a different tack in this instance? Brinkley’s gloss supplies a possible answer. It appears that Carter saw the fruits of Saddam’s aggression as providing valuable leverage against Israel that he did not want to see squandered. Why he might have been thinking in such terms is a subject to which we shall return.

IN ADDITION to his efforts as a letter-writer, Carter, much like Jesse Jackson or Al Sharpton, has materialized at the scenes of various crises over the years in the hope of making a difference—usually to little effect. His arrival in Yugoslavia during the Bosnia war in the mid-1990’s is memorable mostly for the praise he garnered from president

Slobodan Milosevic, who hailed him as “the first American” in a while to have “understood the situation in our country,” as well as for Carter’s erroneous forecast that “the prospect for ending the crisis through [U.S.] military means” was “almost hopeless.” (A NATO bombing campaign some months later brought it to an abrupt halt.) A similar appearance in Haiti was notable for his approval of the human-rights record of the military strongman Raoul Cedras, reminiscent of his encomiums to Tito, Gierak, and Ceausescu.

In North Korea, however, Carter’s on-the-scene intervention had real consequences that reverberate still. A new book by Marion Creekmore, Jr., a former diplomat who served as Carter’s adjutant on this mission, gives us the full story “from Carter’s viewpoint.”² Gushing admiration, Creekmore tells us that Carter, “though pilloried by the hawks and hard-liners as idealistic, naive, gullible, put his historical reputation on the line” to prevent war “regardless of the potential cost to him,” and that in Pyongyang he managed to “cut the deal that ‘experts’ said could not be cut.” The book is glossed with an introduction by Carter himself, patently unembarrassed by such fawning praise.

Let me set the background. After years of work on nuclear construction, North Korea had signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1985. It had then proceeded to bob and weave around the NPT’s disclosure-and-inspection obligations.³ In the face of pressure from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Pyongyang declared in 1993 that it was withdrawing from the treaty and rebuffed various inducements offered by the Clinton administration to reconsider. The matter came to a boil when the North Koreans announced they were removing fuel rods from their nuclear reactor at Yongbyon. This would make possible the extraction of plutonium from which bombs could be made, and would also prevent testing by the IAEA to see if some had been extracted earlier. When the IAEA referred the matter to the UN Security Council, Pyongyang announced that it would view any UN sanctions as acts of war.

Enter Jimmy Carter. He had received numerous invitations from Kim Il Sung to visit North Korea. Kim, who had been hand-picked by Stalin as the leader of the Korean Communists, ruled his country more tyrannically than any other dictator alive. But Carter was in his good graces: as President, he had tried to withdraw unilaterally the U.S. forces that protected South Korea from a second invasion from the North, and was prevented from doing so only by adverse opinion at home.

Successive U.S. administrations had discouraged Carter from accepting Kim’s invitations. But now that the situation was heating up, he decided on his own, writes Creekmore, that “if Washington objected, he would go anyway and involve himself directly in a major international dispute.” Officials working for President Clinton were not happy about this, but since they “knew that they could not stop Carter’s travel . . . they sought to frame for him a useful and confined position as a message-carrier and fact-finder.”

Carter sidestepped these limits. Convinced that the roots of the crisis lay in the “incredible lack of communication and understanding” between Washington and Pyongyang, he felt he could solve the crisis on the basis of his superior understanding of his hosts. The “experts” may have believed that North Korea was building nuclear weapons in order to enhance its military power, but Carter was sure it was looking only for bargaining chips. According to Creekmore, he “believed that Kim Il Sung wanted security and trade for his country and a denuclearized Korean peninsula,” and that as a mediator he was uniquely positioned to work out a fair bargain. As Carter himself explains in his introduction:

In addition to showing respect for adversaries, a mediator or a negotiator must also try to understand their frames of reference, their motivations, and the pressures on them. This is very difficult for Americans, who take the economic, military, and cultural preeminence of our nation for granted and rarely consider it necessary to understand or accommodate contrary views from other people.

ACCOMMODATING contrary views was not Carter’s problem, at least when it came to the North Koreans. The real obstacle, as he saw it, was President Clinton’s strong declaratory stance against North Korean nuclear weapons, which he believed was counterproductive. Still worse was the stance of IAEA chief Hans Blix, who was insisting on upholding the rules of the NPT and on getting Pyongyang to account for plutonium it might have already recovered. To overcome these irritants, which only played into the hands of “hard-liners” in North Korea, Carter determined “to build a

² *A Moment of Crisis: Jimmy Carter, the Power of a Peacemaker, and North Korea’s Nuclear Ambitions* by Marion Creekmore, Jr. Public Affairs, 406 pp., \$26.95.

³ For some of the details, see my “Facing Up to North Korea” in COMMENTARY, March 2003.

personal relationship involving trust” with Kim Il Sung.

This he did by telling Kim it was “tragic” that the IAEA had “brought to the UN Security Council a report saying that North Korea has violated its agreements.” Then he added, in a direct attack on U.S. policy, “I think this sanctions effort is a serious mistake.” Having thus built trust, he went on to assure Kim that “The U.S. desires to live in peace and harmony with North Korea. We don’t believe our different government systems should be an obstacle to full cooperation and friendship.”

For Carter, indeed, there appears to have been a solid basis for such friendship. Far from being the hive of fear and deprivation that other visitors had described—and from which masses had fled illegally into China at great peril—North Korea was just like home. He found the shops in Pyongyang to be similar to the “Wal-Mart in Americus, Georgia,” and the neon lights of the capital reminded him of Times Square. Not only were the people “friendly and open,” but the regime reflected their popular will, which he discovered to be “homogeneous.”

That is precisely why, he later explained in a press conference, he was so opposed to sanctions. For the North Korean people would look upon them as a

personal insult to their so-called Great Leader, branding him as a liar and a criminal. This is something . . . which it would be impossible for them to accept. I thought this before I went to North Korea and that’s why I went. Now after observing their psyche and their societal structure and the reverence with which they look upon their leader, I’m even more convinced.

In short order, Carter and Kim struck a deal. North Korea would be given two light-water nuclear reactors in exchange for its graphite reactor, the former being somewhat less easy than the latter to use for making weapons. In return for a U.S. commitment to enter into talks over a North Korean wish list, Pyongyang would verifiably freeze its activity with the fuel rods. Whatever weapons material the North Koreans had earlier extracted (enough for one or two bombs, in most estimates) would in effect be forgotten about.

Carter intended all of the specifics of this trade-off to be ironed out by diplomats, but he hastened to announce the agreement itself in front of news cameras even before reporting it to Washington. Thereby, he exulted afterward to Creekmore, he had driven a stake through the heart of U.S. policy: “When the cameras shut down, Carter was all

smiles. . . . ‘That killed the sanctions resolution,’ he said.”

Feeling at once boxed in and relieved, the Clinton administration proceeded to formalize Carter’s deal in the so-called Agreed Framework. Carter hailed this as a great triumph, calling his own accomplishment a “miracle.”

INDEED, THE Agreed Framework did keep the Yongbyon reactor harmless for the next eight years, as Creekmore and Carter have repeatedly emphasized. In exchange, North Korea received a great part of its fuel as a gift from the United States, Japan, and South Korea. And yet, despite the “trust” established by Carter, North Korea, while leaving its plutonium reactor under international observation, proceeded to develop a separate, clandestine nuclear-weapons program at Kumchangri based on highly enriched uranium. Nobody knows when work on the facility began, but U.S. intelligence seems to have become aware of it in 1996.

In 2002, Bush administration officials confronted North Korean representatives over this blatant cheating. They acknowledged the truth of it, although in a tone not of apology but of anger. Renouncing its obligations under the Agreed Framework, the regime promptly began to reprocess the Yongbyon fuel rods for more weapons material, and declared threateningly that it possessed some other, “more powerful” secret programs.

Carter’s own initial reaction to this 2002 blow-up was to blame the U.S. and North Korea equally for failing to honor the Agreed Framework. But neither he nor Creekmore can explain what exactly the U.S. failed to do. The reason for this is self-evident: even if the U.S. did commit some bagatelle of noncompliance, it could not possibly be considered equivalent to North Korea’s developing an entire secret nuclear-weapons program (and perhaps multiple ones) negating the very purpose of the agreement.

Then, last year, North Korea tested a nuclear bomb. Pyongyang had always insisted, including in its talks with Carter, that it sought nuclear energy only for the purpose of generating electricity. Now it changed its tune, asserting that it was entitled to new deference as a member of the “nuclear club.” And Carter, too, changed his tune. No longer blaming both sides impartially, he now put the blame squarely on the U.S. and specifically on President Bush. “Beginning in 2002,” he wrote in an essay for the *New York Times*,

the United States branded North Korea as part of an axis of evil, threatened military action,

ended the shipments of fuel oil and the construction of nuclear power plants, and refused to consider further bilateral talks. In their discussions with me at this time, North Korean spokesmen seemed convinced that the American positions posed a serious danger to their country and to its political regime.

He did not mention North Korea's secret nuclear program, to which each of the American actions he decried was in whole or part a response.

America's options in dealing with Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions were never attractive, but they are worse now than they were before Carter's self-aggrandizing intervention. In 1994, a military strike against North Korean nuclear facilities would have been perilous, but it was an important option to have available and may have been our best choice, as some senior military and diplomatic figures argued at the time. Today, a strike against a nuclear-armed North Korea would be infinitely more perilous. In short, America is in more difficult straits and the world is more dangerous as a direct result of Carter's actions.

UNREPENTANT, Carter has lately turned his focus anew to the Arab-Israel conflict. *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*⁴ is his second book on the subject, a reprise in shriller terms of the themes sounded in his earlier *The Blood of Abraham* (1985). Carter's interest in the conflict is in one sense natural: the agreement he mediated between Israel and Egypt at Camp David in 1978 stands as one of the few solid achievements of his presidency. Yet the intensity of his rhetoric suggests that his absorption with this issue derives from something deeper than the pleasure of returning to the scene of past triumphs.⁵

For someone who once played and still fancies himself in the role of mediator, Carter's visceral attitudes to the two sides are strikingly disparate. He finds something to like in every Arab leader he meets. In light of Camp David, his fondness for Sadat is easy to understand. But he also seems to have felt warmly toward Syria's dictator Hafez al-Assad, who in the late 1970's led the recriminations against Sadat for allegedly betraying the Arab cause in making peace with Israel. Upon meeting Assad in 1978, Carter noted in his diary that "[t]here was a lot of good humor between us, and I found him to be constructive in attitude."

The Palestine Liberation Organization also tried to scuttle the Camp David agreement, but this hardly seems to have diminished Carter's affection for Yasir Arafat. In the new book, Carter writes

blandly that "When I met with Yasir Arafat in 1990, he stated, 'The PLO has never advocated the annihilation of Israel. The Zionists started the "drive the Jews into the sea" slogan and attributed it to the PLO.'" This fabrication Carter quotes without comment, leaving the reader to take it at face value. In fact, of course, the covenant of the PLO states that the

partition of Palestine, which took place in 1947, and the establishment of Israel are fundamentally invalid. . . . The Palestinian Arab people . . . reject all alternatives to the total liberation of Palestine.

There is no doubt that Carter is familiar with this, because (as we learn from Brinkley) in a private meeting he lobbied Arafat unsuccessfully to amend it. On that meeting, Carter is mum here.

Besides giving a pass to Arafat's mendacities, Carter also assisted him more actively by, in Brinkley's words, seeking to "reshap[e] how Yasir Arafat was understood in the United States, not as a terrorist but as a peacemaker." Toward that end, Carter volunteered as a ghostwriter, "draft[ing] on his home computer the strategy and wording for a generic speech Arafat was to deliver soon for Western ears." In 1990, when Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein's occupation of Kuwait led to a devastating loss of funding for the PLO, Carter appealed to Saudi Arabia to turn the spigot back on. As Brinkley summarizes the ex-President's feelings for the PLO chieftain, this was a "fondness . . . that transcended politics, based on their emotional connection and the shared belief that they were both ordained to be peacemakers by God."

NO SUCH emotional connection, certainly, characterizes Carter's feelings about most Israeli leaders he has met—including Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, Yitzhak Shamir, Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon, and Ehud Olmert. Universally, they seem rather to evoke his dislike, and Israel as a whole seems to have the same effect on him. In his new book he complains about the country's secularism, noting that the Bibles handed to recruits at the completion of military training are "one of the few

⁴ Simon & Schuster, 288 pp., \$27.00.

⁵ Success at Camp David imbued Carter with supreme confidence in his own abilities as a mediator, but once Egypt's President Anwar Sadat had taken his remarkable peace journey to Israel in 1977, the rest was a matter of resolving details. This is a far cry from situations like Bosnia or Korea, where the goals of the parties remained fundamentally antagonistic. Ironically, Carter, fixated on multilateral initiatives in the Middle East, had at first responded coolly to Sadat's gesture.

indications of a religious commitment that I observed.” But he has no use for religious Israelis, either, complaining that “very conservative religious parties [are] granted almost exclusive control over all forms of worship.”⁶ One cannot help comparing this with Carter’s praise of the Saudi royal family for “preserving the proper degree of religious commitment” in their country—a country where Christian Bibles are sometimes confiscated at the border and Jews were long barred altogether.

Whether Carter’s liking for Arabs and dislike for Israelis is cause or effect, an overwhelming bias resonates on almost every page of his new book. Thus, he repeatedly denounces Israel for violating Palestinian human rights—a denunciation that sits oddly not only with his fatuous approval of such world-class human-rights abusers as Ceausescu, Kim, and Milosevic, but also with his delicately constrained comments on the human-rights practices of the Saudi rulers, who in his unctuous words “offset their absolute authority with a remarkable closeness to their subjects.”

And what about the human rights of the Palestinians at the hands of their own leaders? According to Freedom House, the degree of freedom enjoyed in parts of the West Bank and Gaza administered by the Palestinian Authority has scarcely exceeded that in the parts administered by Israel. But Carter has remained silent about the abuse of Palestinians by Arafat and his successors.

To make Israel the culprit of his historical narrative, Carter is compelled to turn many things upside down. In the 1970’s, he writes, “rejection of Israel was shared by the leaders of all Arab nations, following four wars in the previous 25 years.” This sentence gives the impression that the “four wars” somehow caused Arab rejectionism, when the inverse is true: rejection of Israel was the reason for the wars. In another inversion, he claims that Israeli plans to divert water from the Jordan and the Sea of Galilee were what prompted the founding of the PLO in 1964. In fact, when the Arab states turned down a U.S. plan for the distribution of water because it would allow “the Zionists to consolidate their existence,” Israel secured American approval to divert a smaller amount on its own, to which the Arabs retaliated by diverting water upstream of Israel and by forming the PLO as an anti-Israel guerrilla movement to continue the war of annihilation by other means.

In still another passage Carter writes: “One of the vulnerabilities of Israel and a potential cause of violence is the holding of prisoners,” thus making it out that Israel’s imprisonment of terrorists caus-

es violence when it is terrorist violence that causes imprisonment. In a like vein, he asserts that “Palestinian leaders unequivocally accepted” the Bush administration’s “road map” while “Israel has officially rejected its key provisions with unacceptable caveats and prerequisites.” The reason Israel announced caveats is that it took the document seriously. The Palestinians may have accepted the road map rhetorically, but they have not fulfilled, and have declared they will not fulfill, its cornerstone requirement—namely, that “Palestinians declare an unequivocal end to violence and terrorism and undertake visible efforts on the ground to arrest, disrupt, and restrain individuals and groups conducting and planning violent attacks on Israelis anywhere.”

OF THIS, Carter breathes not a word. Instead, over and over again he denies, omits, obscures, justifies, or defines away Arab terrorism against Israel. In one place, for example, erasing the distinction between victims who are deliberately targeted and those who are harmed accidentally, he asserts that “the killing of noncombatants in Israel, Palestine, and Lebanon by bombs, missile attacks, assassinations, or other acts of violence cannot be condoned.” Eliding yet another distinction, he uses the euphemism “dissidents” for terrorists. In another place, he claims absurdly that “As a people, [Palestinians] were branded by Israeli officials as terrorists, and even minor expressions of displeasure brought the most severe punishment.” As for what the PLO was doing all those years when Israel was falsely “branding” the Palestinians as terrorists, it seems that after 1969, when he became chairman of the PLO, “Arafat turned much of his attention to raising funds for the care and support of the refugees.”

It is not only Arafat whose pacifism Carter credits. Now that the PLO has been upstaged by Hamas, he finds peaceful intentions in that quarter, too—even in the face of Hamas denials that it adheres to any such view. Reporting credulously that “Hamas would modify its rejection of Israel if there is a negotiated agreement that Palestinians can approve,” he has urged Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas to forge a coalition government with this terrorist organization that is sworn to Israel’s destruction.

⁶ This is nonsense. Religious authorities maintain control over various public and legal functions, such as Sabbath operations of government services or marriage and conversion, not over “worship”; and the authority of Christian and Muslim clergy is recognized as applying to members of those faiths.

Hamas, Carter writes, has “meticulously observed a cease-fire commitment,” and “since August of 2004 [it] has not committed a single act of terrorism that cost an Israeli life.” How Carter purports to know this, no one can say, since throughout the book he provides neither footnotes nor citations. As it happens, Hamas announces its operations on its websites and elsewhere. In the time frame Carter specifies, Hamas claimed responsibility for fifteen terror attacks that killed 26 Israelis: two young children and eleven other civilians, and thirteen soldiers. Two of the soldiers were killed in the course of the kidnapping of a third, Gilad Shalit, in an incident that Carter himself refers to (naturally faulting Israel).

Finally, while minimizing any Arab wish or intent to destroy Israel, Carter professes himself uncertain about the intentions of the other side. In *The Blood of Abraham* he wrote:

Without ever abandoning their most ambitious goals of a uniquely Jewish nation, with boundaries similar to those in the time of King David and surrounded by acquiescent and peaceful neighbors, the Jews have been willing to pursue them in incremental steps, even compromising for a while when necessary.

Although he does not repeat this assertion in the new book, he has never retracted or revised it. In his view, the underlying source of the conflict is “Israel’s continued control and colonization of Palestinian land.” Thus he concludes:

The bottom line is this: peace will come to Israel and the Middle East only when the Israeli government is willing to comply with international law, with the Roadmap for Peace, with official American policy, with the wishes of a majority of its own citizens—and honor its own previous commitments—by accepting its legal borders.

As for the “general Arab community and all significant Palestinian groups,” they too need to make it clear that they “will end the suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism”—but only “when international laws and the ultimate goals of the Roadmap for Peace are accepted by Israel.” In other words, it is all right for terrorism against Israel to continue. Until when? Well, since Carter dismisses Israel’s repeated declarations that it accepts both international law and the road map, this formulation can only mean that the terror should continue until Israel bows to the interpretations and conditions set by the Arabs.

WHEN IT comes to Israel, it would take a book to catalogue all of Carter’s false or wildly misleading statements on matters historical, political, military, and diplomatic. Kenneth Stein, a Middle East expert at the Carter Center who had helped write *The Blood of Abraham*, resigned to protest the latest book. “It is replete with factual errors, copied materials not cited, superficialities, glaring omissions, and simply invented segments,” Stein wrote. “Aside from the one-sided nature of the book . . . there are recollections cited from meetings where I was the third person in the room, and my notes of those meetings show little similarity to points claimed in the book.”

What is to explain Carter’s passion against Israel? This question is not easy to answer. A recent article in the online journal *FrontPage* enumerated some of the millions of dollars that the Carter Center receives from Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Arab states, but it is hard to know whether this is inducement or merely a benefit of Carter’s position. It is also true that opposition to Israel fits seamlessly into the ex-President’s leftist/third-worldist outlook in general. But this too does not explain the blind intensity of his obsession.

Something of the old-fashioned pre-Vatican II Christian animus toward Jews may be at work in Carter. In *The Blood of Abraham*, he claimed pointedly that Jews regard themselves as a chosen “race.” (In fact the biblical idea of a “chosen people” is not racial: anyone may join this “race” by conversion.) A similar spirit creeps into several passages of his recent book. In one place he writes of a visit “with some of the few surviving Samaritans, who complained to us that their holy sites and culture were not being respected by Israeli authorities—the same complaint heard by Jesus and his disciples almost 2,000 years earlier.” In another he says of Israel’s anti-terrorist barrier (which he refers to variously as the “segregation barrier” and the “imprisonment wall”): “The wall ravages many places along its devious route that are important to Christians. In addition to enclosing Bethlehem in one of its most notable intrusions, an especially heartbreaking division is on the southern slope of the Mount of Olives, a favorite place for Jesus and his disciples.” In still another, he claims that Jewish discrimination has caused “a surprising exodus of Christians from the Holy Land.” (A more powerful cause is persecution of Christians by Muslims; but Carter says nothing, for example, of the YMCA in the West Bank town of Qalqilya that was ordered closed by Hamas officials and then burned to the ground.)

Sounding a more contemporary note of Jew-bashing, Carter echoes newly revived speculations about a conspiracy among American advocates of Israel's cause. "Because of powerful political, economic, and religious forces in the United States," he writes, "Israeli government decisions are rarely questioned or condemned, [and] voices from Jerusalem dominate in our media." Who might those "powerful . . . religious forces" be? The Christian Right supports Israel, but no one has ever accused it of dominating the media. Carter can only mean the Jews.

In a speech at a book event in November, Carter dwelled at length on the so-called Geneva Accord, an unofficial 2003 proposal for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement in which he was involved. Then he added: "Never, in this country, do you hear any of these issues proposed publicly by an elected member of the House or the Senate or in the White House or NBC or ABC or CBS, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *LA Times*. Never." His point was that the "media" suppress views like his own. In truth, when the accord was announced, a *New York Times* editorial hailed it as "truly momentous," and the other papers mentioned by Carter also praised it in editorials and gave it ample coverage in news and feature stories. But he will not see what he will not see.

As Carter's latest book and speeches have begun to evoke criticism from Jewish groups and others, he has taken on a new role: that of the martyr. After declining to debate Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz at Brandeis University, he took umbrage when the university, for its part, declined his request that it hire a private plane to bring him to speak alone. The incident led him to declare in the press: "My most troubling experience has been the rejection of my offers to speak, for free, about the book on university campuses with high Jewish enrollment." In sum, Carter, who seems to think of himself as a latter-day prince of peace, and who has performed "miracles" in North Korea and elsewhere, is now being persecuted for his goodness by the Jews.

EVER SINCE his presidency, there has been a wide gap between Carter's estimation of himself and the esteem in which other Americans hold him. This has manifestly embittered him. For all his talk of "love," the driving motives behind his post-presidential ventures seem, in fact, to be bit-

terness together with narcissism (as it happens, two prime ingredients of a martyr complex). But he has worked hard to earn the reputation he enjoys. In contravention of the elementary responsibilities of loyalty for one in his position, he has denigrated American policies and leaders in his public and private discussions in foreign lands. He has undertaken personal diplomacy to thwart the policies of the men elected to succeed him. And in doing so he has, at least in the case of North Korea, actively damaged our security.

At home, Carter's criticisms of the policies of his successors are offered up with reckless abandon. For example, when the Patriot Act and related measures curtailed the rights of defendants accused of terrorism, Carter editorialized that "in many nations, defenders of human rights were the first to feel the consequences." The charge was simply a concoction, and not a single example was offered to substantiate it. In this manner, Carter has made himself a willing hook on which foreigners can hang their anti-American feelings. When he was given the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, the chairman of the committee allowed that the award "should be interpreted as a criticism of the line that the current administration has taken. It's a kick in the leg to all who follow the same line as the United States."

Carter's special rancor toward Israel remains to some degree mysterious, as such sentiments often are, but it is likely we have not heard the last of it. As the protests and criticisms of him continue, he may well sink deeper into his sense of angry martyrdom, following the path recently trod by academics like John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, who fancy themselves victims of the very Jewish conspiracies they set out to expose. It is sad that a President whose cardinal accomplishment was a peace accord between Israel and one of its neighbors should have devolved into such a seething enemy of Israel. It will be sadder still if this same man, whose other achievement was to elevate the cause of human rights, ends his career by helping to make anti-Semitism acceptable once again in American discourse.

There is little doubt, in sum, that the electorate was right in 1980 when it judged Carter to have been among our worst Presidents. It is even more certain that history will judge him to have been our very worst ex-President.