

**“Good Jimmy, Bad Jimmy”:
Jimmy Carter and the Press, 1980-2010**

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For my parents

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Introduction

Speaking at the University of Havana in Cuba, Jimmy Carter gave an impassioned address urging Fidel Castro to abide by the human rights stipulations embodied in Cuba's constitution. Delivered in fluent Spanish and broadcast on Cuban national television, Carter's speech amounted to a public rebuke of Castro, the communist leader with whom the United States had long ago severed diplomatic and economic ties. But at the same time, Carter did not spare his own country of criticism, saying the U.S. embargo of Cuba was detrimental to both countries' interests. He argued that cross-cultural exchange and honest dialogue were essential in establishing the foundations for democracy in Cuba. If the U.S. did not take steps to foster better relations with the communist country, Carter maintained, it should not expect Cuban society to become more open and democratic.

Carter's visit to Cuba generated considerable attention in national newspapers and magazines. Both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran editorials about the trip, and some of Carter's regional and local newspapers, including the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, also commented on the merits of his diplomacy in Cuba. What was perhaps most intriguing about this press coverage of the trip was a line from a story that appeared in *Newsweek*. It read: "Once Carter gets it into his head that he's carrying the banner for human rights, he might as well still be president. There is no higher authority that can stop him."¹

Carter was speaking in May 2002. He had been out of office for more than twenty years.

¹ Eleanor Clift, "The Mixed Blessing of Jimmy Carter," *Newsweek*, 17 May 2002.

And yet this image seems so resolutely presidential: surrounded by television cameras, newspaper reporters, and university students, Carter is decrying Castro's human rights abuses and stressing the importance of closer ties between the U.S. and Cuba. This type of diplomacy is, after all, what presidents do. But the fact that Carter was decidedly *not* president during his Cuba trip reveals a larger truth about his career as a former president: it has been the most extraordinary in American history.

In some respects, it was a long road back to prominence for President Carter. After suffering a resounding defeat to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election, Carter left office unpopular—even disliked—among both the press and the public. He had been rejected for his deficient leadership skills and inability to resolve the intractable problems that dogged his administration, notably persistent inflation and, in the last year of his presidency, the Iran hostage crisis. Only a few years after his term ended, however, Carter once again seized the national spotlight. He staged a dramatic comeback as a global humanitarian activist, recommitting himself to the human rights issues that had been a cornerstone of his presidency. He became, as the *Washington Post* later put it, a “global fireman,” shuttling from crisis to crisis in what seemed like a relentless drive to alleviate some of the world's gravest problems.

Carter institutionalized his grand humanitarian ambitions in the Carter Center, which officially opened in 1986 as a global center for conflict resolution. In conjunction with members of the Center, Carter has worked to mediate civil wars, guide peaceful transfers of political power, and resolve foreign diplomatic disputes in places like Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and North Korea. In addition, he has monitored elections in a number of foreign countries, including Panama, Nicaragua, Haiti, the Dominican

Republic, Zambia, Guyana, Paraguay, the West Bank/Gaza, Liberia, and Jamaica.² Carter has also worked to alleviate river blindness and guinea worm disease in Africa, and he has hosted academic conferences on arms control and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Moreover, Carter has become heavily involved with Habitat for Humanity, an organization dedicated to building homes for the world's poor. His post-presidential activism culminated in his 2002 reception of the Nobel Peace Prize, an award that testified to his impressive accomplishments since leaving the White House.

On the other hand, Carter has also arguably been the most controversial former president in American history. In the last twenty-five years, his intense activism on behalf of the Palestinians has alienated many people, especially American Jews, who allege that he pins disproportionate blame on the Israelis for preventing an enduring peace settlement in the Middle East. Although Carter's strong views on the conflict date from even before his presidency, he did not incur major damage to his reputation until the 2006 publication of *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*. This book generated anger in the press and among certain sectors of the public because Carter asserted that Israel's separation wall between the West Bank and Israel proper enforced what he termed a system of "apartheid," under which the Palestinians were deprived of their basic human rights. The publication of this book caused severe damage to Carter's public image. The revered former president was suddenly forced to fend off accusations of anti-Israel sentiments or even anti-Semitism. It was a stark departure from the virtually universal praise Carter received upon winning the Nobel Peace Prize just four years earlier.

² Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), xvii.

Carter's post-presidency is clearly worthy of examination. But his post-presidential activities are not my primary concern here. Rather, I examine these activities through the lens of the U.S. print news media, tracking the press coverage of Carter's various pursuits, from his role as a mediator in foreign civil wars and electoral disputes to his work as a pro-Palestinian diplomat and human rights advocate.³ In particular, I analyze how different newspapers and magazines have responded to Carter's post-presidential activities, while paying particular attention to those activities that have prompted a notable reaction from journalists, whether it was an election-monitoring initiative, the publication of a book, or a negotiating enterprise between two warring countries.

Over the past thirty years, Carter has experienced extreme vicissitudes in his relationship with the news media. During the last two years of his term, the press was relentless in criticizing his administration, and he consequently left office bitter and frustrated with reporters' assessments of his presidency. Evidence abounds of President Carter's tense relationship with the press. In one letter, he accused *Newsweek* of fabricating sources for its articles, asserting that it "is perhaps the worst violator of the self-initiated story..."⁴ Further underscoring this tension, Press Secretary Jody Powell produced a memoir filled with invective for the Washington press corps. But this fraught relationship gradually changed as Carter embarked on his post-presidency. For much of the last three decades, he has enjoyed increasingly positive press coverage for his

³ While I recognize that television and (more recently) the Internet are also important outlets for news, I maintain that most of their information is based on reporting originally published in newspapers or magazines. In any case, since the Internet has only become a major source of news in the last decade, the vast majority of Carter's post-presidency was reported in newspapers or magazines. Finally, I chose to specifically study print journalism as a mode of communicating the news, which I consider sufficient justification for restricting my thesis to print news sources.

⁴ Letter, Jimmy Carter to Henry Maier, 11/3/77, Jody Powell's Files, Memoranda: President Carter 9/6/77-12/27/77 [CF/OA 55], Box 39, JCL.

humanitarian activities, even though there is scant evidence that he likes reporters more now than he did during his presidency. As James Fallows, a former Carter speechwriter and longtime journalist for the *Atlantic Monthly*, argues, “I would be amazed if he weren’t still contemptuous of the press. If most politicians feel that, some can conceal it better than others. Carter thinks, ‘Why would I conceal that?’”⁵

Carter’s relationship with the press warrants intensive study precisely because of these vicissitudes. There are remarkably stark disparities in tone and substance between news articles from the end of his presidency and those from even a few years later. Indeed, the press coverage of Carter in the late 1980s almost seems as if it was describing an entirely different person—a confident, assertive, and esteemed diplomat, rather than an unsuccessful president. This disparity in coverage prompts several questions: What accounts for these divergent portraits of Carter? Has he pursued his post-presidential activities with the goal of rehabilitating his image in the press? How have his specific character traits affected his relationship with reporters and columnists? After leaving office, Carter had an opportunity to revamp his image and establish better relations with the press. What factors afforded him such opportunities? To what extent did he take advantage of them? These are all questions that demonstrate the intriguing nature of Carter’s relationship with the press. Only with sustained analysis is it possible to fully grasp the implications of this complicated and ceaselessly evolving relationship.

Whether or not he is willing to admit it, Carter needs the press, and this dynamic also justifies an incisive examination of this relationship. He depends on journalists to publicize his diplomatic and humanitarian activities, informing the American public of its

⁵ Phone interview with James Fallows, 3/15/2010.

former president's good works. After all, were it not for the press, Carter would not enjoy the esteem that has characterized much of his post-presidency. In this way, he can criticize the press all he wants, but in reality, he ultimately relies on it to maintain visibility and prestige. This is not to say that Carter has learned nothing about manipulating the press for his own benefit. In his post-presidency, he has repeatedly demonstrated a media savvy that seemed notably lacking during his term in office. In one prominent instance, while mediating the North Korea nuclear crisis in 1994, Carter appeared on CNN and unilaterally rejected the use of sanctions—a stance he personally favored—without having briefed Clinton administration officials, who sought to keep their options open in deciding how to defuse the crisis. During the CNN interview, Carter seemed calm, confident, and assertive. Clinton was irate.

The North Korea episode suggests that Carter has experienced an evolution in his understanding of the press and its potential. Previously regarded as an obstacle to fulfilling his presidential agenda, the press eventually became critical in disseminating Carter's post-presidential accomplishments. And he knows it. This serves as yet another reason for examining Carter's relationship with the news media. Throughout his time in the public spotlight, he has continually perceived the press in new and different ways. While the press coverage of Carter has been continually changing, Carter's views of the press have likewise evolved over time.

At the same time as Carter needs the press, there is a sense in which the press also needs Carter. Journalists use the former president as a source of news, as a subject to be written about and studied. Each newspaper or magazine has content to fill, and throughout his post-presidency Carter has often provided that content. His post-

presidential activities have indeed been a boon for journalists looking to apprise people of what their former presidents have been doing. And since American presidents are increasingly treated like celebrities—President Obama is only the latest manifestation of this trend—Carter’s status as a former president makes him a valuable source of news. Any journalist writing about Carter is certain to attract a sizeable readership just by the nature of his having been president. In this way, journalists need Carter as much as he needs them. This mutually beneficial association between Carter and the press serves as another reason to examine the relationship more closely.

Finally, Carter’s experience with the press merits extensive examination because of the way it has so abruptly—and negatively—changed in recent years. Of course, this is not to say that journalists were never critical of Carter’s post-presidency before the publication of *Peace Not Apartheid*. His trips in the mid-1990s to North Korea and Bosnia, as we shall see, both generated intense, if not universal, criticism in the news media. But the provocative nature of Carter’s post-presidency—which crystallized with the publication of his book—has presented journalists with some fundamental questions: how do you write about a former president as ubiquitous *and* controversial as Carter? Or, more basically, how do you write about a former president who has no precedent?

For this thesis, I generally restrict my study to press coverage from the major print news outlets that have a circulation over one million. These outlets include the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*. Given their circulation, these publications constitute a major source of news for the public, and thus serve as a critical component of my study about the media coverage of Carter. In addition, I examine four news sources that circulate fewer than a million copies: the

Washington Post, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Americus Times-Recorder*, and *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*.⁶ Although the *Post* is not distributed nationally, it is nevertheless a critical source of news for those living and working in Washington, D.C., and therefore it remains an influential paper that must be examined in my project. The three Georgia newspapers are also important sources for my thesis. Since they are Carter's local and regional papers, the *Journal-Constitution*, *Times-Recorder*, and *Ledger-Enquirer* have meticulously covered the former president's activities, often publishing stories about him that bigger news outlets like the *Times* did not cover.⁷

This thesis begins with an examination of the phenomenon of the American post-presidency.⁸ From the moment George Washington resigned from office on March 4, 1797, this status of ex-president became enshrined in American political life as a role brimming with both potential and prestige. In this first chapter, I trace the development of the post-presidency, delineating the different activities presidents have pursued once out of office, from writing letters and books to running for office as third party candidates to even, in the case of Grover Cleveland, serving another (nonconsecutive) term as president. I describe the various iterations of the post-presidency and situate Carter in a specific historical context. This context is crucial because it illuminates what makes Carter unique among former presidents. Without knowing the development of the post-

⁶ I have made some exceptions to this list of news sources. For one example, I included some international news sources in my discussion of the press reaction to *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*.

⁷ In incorporating the Georgia newspapers into my project, I tried to strike a balance when determining which of the three sources to use. However, given the differences in size and circulation, oftentimes articles from the *Journal-Constitution*, the largest of the three, presented a more vivid and complete portrait of an event than those from the other two papers (which sometimes did not cover an event at all). This factor accounts for the larger volume of stories from the *Journal-Constitution*.

⁸ Although "post-presidency" is an unwieldy rhetorical construction, it remains the most concise way to express "the time after presidents left office."

presidency, it is difficult to understand the extent to which Carter's activities are virtually unprecedented in American history.

After discussing the history of the post-presidency, I focus on the portrayal of Carter during the waning days of his presidency. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, President Carter was largely portrayed as an ineffectual leader,⁹ and this image serves as the starting point for my analysis. Having assessed the media coverage of the end of Carter's presidency, I closely track the coverage of his rise as a humanitarian and peace activist, focusing on how the media portrayed the elections he monitored in the 1980s and 1990s—especially those in Panama in 1989—as well as examining what the media wrote about his work in North Korea, Haiti, and Bosnia in the mid-1990s. My thesis culminates in an analysis of the media coverage of Carter as a diplomat in the Middle East, particularly his role in the resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the publication of *Peace Not Apartheid*.

In addressing this last subject, I chart Carter's escalating involvement in the Middle East, starting from his brokering of the Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt in 1978 and continuing until the present day. This study entails looking at the media coverage of the unofficial diplomatic trips that Carter made to the Middle East throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in addition to observing how the media have portrayed his involvement in the first democratic Palestinian elections in 1996. Besides examining the coverage of Carter's actual diplomatic activities, I also consider how the media have responded to Carter's speeches, editorials, and books about the Middle East. In recent years, Carter has made a number of statements criticizing Israel's brutality toward the

⁹ Lance Morrow, "Is There Life After Disaster?" *Time*, 17 November 1980, 4.

Palestinians, and I seek to understand how the media have portrayed these statements and the former president's other commentary on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In choosing the media coverage of Carter's involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict as the culmination of my thesis, I attempt to isolate the most notorious part of Carter's post-presidency in order to understand and explain news media representations of his persistent outspokenness on the issue. While his humanitarian activities are certainly laudable and unusual for an ex-president—Carter could have been fishing, golfing, or delivering lucrative speeches¹⁰—these benevolent works have not, with only a few exceptions, been controversial or provocative. For his charitable acts, Carter has largely been applauded by the media and the American public; there is perhaps no better proof of this widespread approbation than Carter's winning of the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize, which celebrated 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.”¹¹ And Carter has successfully employed this positive media coverage to buttress his reputation and credibility as a moral authority on humanitarian issues. His post-presidential prestige largely stems from his being considered “a world figure recognized for his integrity and his dedicated moral commitment to peace and justice. As a global humanitarian, he has become the leading American ‘do-gooder’ for the world.”¹² In this way, Carter has capitalized on the positive press coverage of his humanitarian activities, using it to enhance his clout as a moral crusader and human rights advocate.

¹⁰ “Comeback for Carter,” *Washington Post*, 16 October 2002, 16.

¹¹ The Nobel Foundation. “The Nobel Peace Prize 2002, (Nobel Prize, 2002), http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2002/index.html (accessed March 30, 2009).

¹² John Whiteclay Chambers II. “Jimmy Carter's Public Policy Ex-Presidency,” *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 113: no. 3 (1998): 410-11.

Carter has tried to employ this moral authority to mediate the Arab-Israeli conflict, but his involvement in this issue has not generated the fervent support he has received for his humanitarian works. Rather, Carter has been assailed for his attempt to mediate the conflict, with many of the major news outlets objecting to his unrelenting and uninformed criticism of Israel and its treatment of the Palestinians. In contrast to the largely positive coverage of Carter's mediation of foreign disputes and elections, the media have adopted a considerably more negative tone in assessing Carter's views on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, the media have shown intensified scrutiny of Carter's statements on Israel and his unconditional support of the Palestinians.

In the modern era of American politics, there exists no journalistic template for covering someone like Carter. He has cultivated a new mold for the American ex-president, a role that is provocative, ostentatious, and occasionally exasperating. He is, as one *Washington Post* headline called him, the "Peace Provocateur,"¹³ delivering an incendiary speech or writing a book with "apartheid" in the title, and then waiting for the predictable controversy to begin. Indeed, since leaving office, Carter has repeatedly injected himself into national and international debates, perpetually reminding the American public that he has an opinion on these important matters. Whether he is criticizing the Israeli occupation of the West Bank or impugning U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson as a racist for shouting "You lie" during President Obama's September 2009 national address, Carter remains at the forefront of American political life. And he clearly intends on keeping it that way.

¹³ Bob Thompson, "Peace Provocateur: Jimmy Carter's New Hammer? It Looks an Awful Lot Like a Book," *Washington Post*, 10 December 2006, 1 (sec. D).

Journalists have spent the past thirty years offering competing representations of Jimmy Carter. In this thesis, I attempt to track the different ways these journalists have decided to portray this inimitable, ardent, and omnipresent Peace Provocateur.

Chapter One: The American Post-Presidency in History

Clinton has both motive and opportunity to keep himself in the public eye: motive because of doubts about his legacy; opportunity because of his vigor and relative youth. His circumstances fit a more general trend, which is the institutionalization of the post-presidency as part of political life.¹

In a letter to William F. Vilas dated April 19, 1889, Grover Cleveland related an interview he had with Henry Watterson, the longtime editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal*. Watterson was concerned that, at some point in the future, a zealous president's aspirations might lead him to capture a third term and, eventually, to occupy the presidency for the rest of his life. Perhaps hoping to mollify these fears of an imperial officeholder, Watterson sought Cleveland's opinion on the proper role of the American ex-president. Cleveland, in a remark enshrined in the annals of presidential wit, concurred with Watterson's own morbid suggestion: "And still the question, 'What shall be done with our ex-Presidents?' is not laid at rest; and I sometimes think Watterson's solution of it, 'Take them out and shoot them,' is worthy of attention."²

It should be noted, however, that Cleveland's own post-presidency did not exactly adhere to this lethal, if facetious, prescription discussed in the interview with Watterson. After losing his reelection bid to Benjamin Harrison in 1888, Cleveland reemerged just four years later to win the Democratic nomination for president, the first and only time a former president has been nominated again for the presidency by a major political party.³ Cleveland then proceeded to win the 1892 presidential election, becoming the only ex-president in American history to win two nonconsecutive terms. Moreover, when his

¹ James Fallows, "Post-President for Life," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2003, 2.

² Grover Cleveland, *Letters of Grover Cleveland: 1850-1908*, ed. Allan Nevins (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1933), 203-4.

³ Max J. Skidmore. *After the White House* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 90.

second term ended, Cleveland did not simply recede into what one scholar has termed “dignified obscurity.”⁴ He joined the faculty of Princeton University, lecturing there and receiving an honorary doctorate in 1897, and eventually became chairman of its board of trustees. Cleveland also wrote for several magazines and, in 1904, published a book, *Presidential Problems*, which addressed prominent issues during his administration.⁵

Cleveland’s illustrious post-presidency demonstrates the manifold exciting—and important—opportunities available to former presidents who leave office in good health and with their mental faculties intact. Indeed, who would have thought that Cleveland’s post-presidency would entail serving another nonconsecutive term as president? While he is certainly unique in this respect, there are plenty of other presidents who have led storied lives after they left the White House. In some extreme cases, there are presidents who have arguably experienced more success *after* their tenure in office than during it.

Therefore, startling and humorous though it may be, Cleveland’s suggestion about shooting former presidents implies several larger (and more serious) questions: what should be the role of a former president? Does he have any defined responsibilities, or can he use the cachet of a “former president” to personally enrich himself? James Fallows noted that, in recent years, there has emerged a trend of the “institutionalization of the post-presidency as part of political life.”⁶ If this is the case, what does this institution look like, and must it remain a monolithic structure, with one paradigm for The Post-Presidency? Or can it be an assortment of diverse experiences and activities that comprises a mosaic of life after the White House? Above all, what should the

⁴ Marie B. Hecht. *Beyond the Presidency* (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1976), 69.

⁵ Max J. Skidmore. *After the White House* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 91.

⁶ James Fallows, “Post-President for Life,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2003, 2.

American people expect of former presidents? If, as two scholars assert, “most American presidents have found ways to occupy themselves in the public sphere after leaving office—whether politically, philanthropically, remuneratively, or redemptively,”⁷ the question of the American post-presidency has remained an important feature of American political life, and will continue to do so in the future.

In this respect, history serves as a useful guide in understanding how the notion of the post-presidency has evolved, and in delineating both the possibilities and limitations of this ambiguous position in American politics. Although several presidents were either assassinated or died of natural causes while in office, thirty-five men have enjoyed post-presidential lives. These former presidents have pursued an array of activities, but in general they have shared three common ambitions: making money, maintaining an honorable public image, and recovering or enhancing their reputation.

Until Dwight Eisenhower signed the Former Presidents Act into law in 1958, there had been no official pension provision for former presidents, which meant that some people—including Thomas Jefferson and Harry Truman—left office with little money and consequently struggled to make a living. As a result, earning a steady income was a major concern for many former presidents before 1958. And even with the legislation, it was not until recently that the pension became large enough to provide a comfortable living for former presidents and their families. For example, upon leaving office in January 2009, George W. Bush—whose personal wealth probably rendered the pension

⁷ Leonard Benardo and Jennifer Weiss. *Citizen-in-Chief* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 4.

financially unnecessary—started to receive a pension of \$196,700, a sum that would have startled many of his predecessors.⁸

Of course, whether or not they received a pension, former presidents have always devised ways of making money once out of office. For example, Grover Cleveland accrued much personal wealth consulting insurance companies, while Theodore Roosevelt signed profitable contracts to write for popular magazines like *Scribner's*. More recently, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan both made large sums of money delivering lucrative speeches and serving as guests or representatives of major corporations. But the differences between these two sets of former presidents could not be starker. While Cleveland and Roosevelt both enjoyed esteemed public lives after leaving office, Reagan and Ford have been remembered as the former presidents who did little else except egregiously cash in on their prestige. This example suggests that if a former president seeks both personal enrichment *and* honor, he would be wise to pursue public service or other charitable work as a complement to his more lucrative activities.

In addition to making money, former presidents have also invariably wanted to maintain an honorable public image. For example, some have used their time out of office to return to political life, whether that meant sitting on the Supreme Court, serving in Congress, launching third parties or, as in Grover Cleveland's case, running for and winning the presidency again. Other former presidents like Thomas Jefferson and Ulysses S. Grant devoted their lives primarily to writing, producing critically acclaimed work that remains influential to this day. Humanitarian activism has proved a common way for former presidents to maintain their honor as well, with Jimmy Carter and Bill

⁸ Emily Brandon, "President Bush Will Get a \$196,700 Pension," *U.S. News and World Report*, 16 January 2009.

Clinton representing two of the most prominent examples of ex-presidents who chose to work for the public good and consequently buttressed their public image.

Recovering or enhancing their reputations has been the third preoccupation of former presidents. Most commonly, they have sought to do this through writing their memoirs, an act that has become a ritual part of post-presidential life and a guaranteed source of income. But some former presidents have used writing as more than just an opportunity to reflect on their time in office and make some money. For example, after leaving office in the depths of public opinion, Herbert Hoover and Richard Nixon both used writing as a means of vindicating their reputations and establishing themselves as authorities on foreign affairs.

Writing is, of course, only one way for former presidents to recover or enhance their reputations. Jimmy Carter serves as an apt example of someone who, prolific though he has been, has bolstered his reputation primarily through his humanitarian and diplomatic activities. Given that he left office widely unpopular, Carter's reception of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 demonstrates his success in burnishing his reputation.

Since the 1930s, former presidents have been united in their desire to build presidential libraries and museums, which has become yet another means of bolstering their reputations. In 1938, Franklin Roosevelt set the precedent for presidential libraries when he decided to house his papers in a public archive. The Presidential Libraries Act of 1955 officially codified the presidential library into law, and shortly thereafter Harry Truman became the first president whose papers fell under the legislation's provisions. Since its inception, the presidential library has represented the institutionalization of a president's legacy in a strikingly unprecedented way. The library serves to memorialize a

president's greatness and ensure the preservation of his reputation. With each new former president, the libraries have become increasingly extravagant, as the new edifices are typically bigger and costlier than the previous ones. For example, George W. Bush's presidential library, built at Southern Methodist University in Texas, cost about \$500 million. Adjusted for inflation, the price was fifty times that of Truman's library in Missouri.⁹

In recent years, presidential museums have joined libraries as a means of polishing a president's reputation and public image, using interactive exhibits and historical displays to present a narrative favorable to the president. In this way, the construction of presidential libraries and museums has become a sacred rite of post-presidential life since the late 1930s. Building a library affords a former president with the opportunity to shape public perceptions of him and his tenure in office, and no one has dared to pass up this chance to construct a glorifying monument to his presidency. As two scholars argue, "the presidential library provides its own official setting for hero worship. In a country bereft of emperors, monarchs, or pharaohs, America's most powerful elected officials have embraced libraries as their personal shrines."¹⁰

* * *

In examining the history of former presidents, it is useful to start with the nation's first ex-president, George Washington. When he resigned from office on March 4, 1797, Washington was content to retire after leading the Continental Army to a triumphant victory in the Revolutionary War. And originally, he did retire, settling at his Mount Vernon estate to restore the property, which had deteriorated significantly during his

⁹ Leonard Benardo and Jennifer Weiss. *Citizen-in-Chief* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 74.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

presidency. Eventually, however, it became clear that tending his estate “did not suit his active nature,”¹¹ and Washington sought to get more involved with the affairs of his successor, President John Adams. During the Adams administration, there was increasing tension with France, and this conflict unnerved Washington, who believed it was his duty to defend the country should a full-scale war break out. Worried that this possibility might be realized, Adams raised a new army, and Washington promptly agreed to serve as active commander for the second time, the only time a president has done so.

A military conflict between America and France never materialized—mostly because of Adams’s policy of neutrality—and Washington never led the troops into combat. Nevertheless, as the nation’s first voluntary former president, he set a precedent for all future ex-presidents. As one scholar notes, “It’s [Washington’s leadership of the military] importance was that a precedent had been set in using an ex-president to bolster the administration in office. The former President had been called out of retirement and expected to serve.”¹² Washington indeed emerged from retirement to have an active political and military life, exercising his clout and irrepressible courage to help Adams in the event war with France erupted.

Of course, Washington’s post-presidential command of the army embodies only one of the many activities former presidents have pursued. Some of Washington’s successors, apparently undeterred by their experiences in the White House, decided to return to public office after having left the presidency. For example, John Adams, whose loss to Jefferson had initially made him resentful, eventually reemerged from his self-

¹¹ Max J. Skidmore. *After the White House* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 10.

¹² Marie B. Hecht. *Beyond the Presidency* (New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1976), 5.

imposed exile to lead the Massachusetts slate of electors for James Monroe's reelection in 1820. Adams also became a delegate to the Massachusetts constitutional convention, where he helped revamp the constitution at age 85. James Madison also chose to return to public office. After retiring to his plantation in Montpelier, Virginia, Madison, the esteemed founding father, was elected in 1829 to a convention that tried to generate a new constitution for the Commonwealth of Virginia, an effort he hoped would ensure equal representation and mitigate the impact of slavery.

One former president who had an eminent return to public office was John Quincy Adams, who, after serving one term in office from 1825 to 1829, was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives on November 7, 1830. In Congress, Adams worked assiduously to pass a bill creating the Smithsonian Institutions, while he also tried to advance the country's human rights agenda, including launching a determined—and ultimately successful—effort to revoke the House's "gag rule," which effectively prevented people from submitting petitions about slavery.

Adams also distinguished himself and solidified his anti-slavery credentials by arguing the *Amistad* trial before the Supreme Court. In this case, Adams fought for the rights of African slaves who had rebelled on their Portuguese slave ship, killing a captain and a chef, and eventually went to prison on murder charges. In a nine-hour appeal before the court, Adams passionately argued that the Africans' enslavement violated their rights of liberty, and that they should be freed immediately. He won the case, dealing a blow to the pro-slavery sentiment that was still resonant in much of the country. As one scholar notes, "Old Man Eloquent [Adams's nickname] contributed far more to humanity than all but a few persons in history. For the most part, he did it not as president, but

afterward.” Indeed, during Adams’s post-presidency, the “cause of human rights worldwide took a step forward.”¹³

John Tyler bears the notorious distinction of being the only former president to “give open aid and comfort to, and to affiliate formally with, an enemy of the United States of America.”¹⁴ Arguing that Virginia should secede from the Union, Tyler joined the Provisional Congress of the Confederacy in 1861 and, soon thereafter, he was elected to the nascent House of Representatives of the Confederate States of America. Andrew Johnson also returned to politics, though in manner considerably less controversial than Tyler’s secessionist insurgency: Johnson regained his own Senate seat in 1875, though he “did little of note in his second political life.”¹⁵ William Howard Taft made a triumphant return to the political stage as well. After spending a few years writing and teaching law at Yale University, Taft was appointed in 1921 to serve as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court after Edward D. White died. He is unique among former presidents in serving as both president and chief justice.

While many former presidents seeking a return to public office have done so through established party channels, there have been some notable exceptions in the form of impressive third party challenges. After Martin Van Buren lost his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1844—a bid that made him the first former president to try to regain office—he captured the nomination in 1848 of the Free Soil Party, which unequivocally opposed the expansion of slavery in territories gained as a result of the Mexican War, a policy embodied in the Wilmot Proviso. In the election, the

¹³ Max J. Skidmore. *After the White House* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

Free Soil Party failed to win any states, but it did attract 10 percent of the popular vote, an impressive share for a third party. Even more significant, by drawing some of the Democratic vote from Lewis Cass, Van Buren's campaign effectively handed the election to the Whig candidate, Zachary Taylor. In addition, the Free Soil Party, which Van Buren helped to create, eventually evolved into the Republican Party. In this way, Van Buren definitively changed the trajectory of American politics.

Millard Fillmore and Theodore Roosevelt also used their post-presidencies to form third parties. After serving as a Whig president for two years—a position to which he ascended after Zachary Taylor's death in July 1850; he had been Taylor's vice president—Fillmore decided to compete in the 1856 election as the leader of the American Party, an insular organization “catalyzed by regional xenophobic secret societies”¹⁶ and based on the notion that native-born protestants should be the exclusive repository of political power. Informally called the “Know-Nothing Party,” Fillmore's organization represented an extreme reaction to the three million Irish Catholic and German immigrants who came to America between 1845 and 1854.¹⁷ Extremist though it was, the Know Nothings performed surprisingly well in the 1856 election: the party captured 22 percent of the popular vote and won the state of Maryland. These electoral results made Fillmore's Know Nothings the most popular third party of the nineteenth century, as well as the first third party to gain electoral votes.

After Roosevelt left office in March 1909, he began his impressive post-presidency with an African safari, during which he accumulated scientific evidence for the

¹⁶ Leonard Benardo and Jennifer Weiss. *Citizen-in-Chief* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 237.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Smithsonian Institution. While traveling abroad, however, Roosevelt realized the great extent to which he missed American politics. After a tour through Europe with his family—during which he gave his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, which presaged the creation of the League of Nations and the UN—he returned home in 1910 and became increasingly involved in American politics. Through many speeches around the country, Roosevelt espoused a “New Nationalism” that advocated using governmental resources to ensure the well-being and liberty of all people. With this doctrine, which also called for other reforms like conservation and workplace compensation, Roosevelt proposed the “most progressive program ever set forth by a prominent American figure” and “laid the groundwork for the reforms” later enacted by Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt.¹⁸

Roosevelt’s escalating involvement in American politics culminated in his decision to challenge Taft for the 1912 Republican nomination for president. Although he was exceedingly popular, Roosevelt lost the nomination because he was unable to best Taft’s entrenched party machinery. As a result, Roosevelt formed the Progressive Party, or the Bull Moose Party, whose platform included many of Roosevelt’s progressive reforms, with the major new provision being social security insurance. While Woodrow Wilson won the 1912 election, Roosevelt and the Bull Moose Party won 27 percent of the popular vote and accumulated 88 electoral votes—results that placed Roosevelt second in the race, in front of Taft, who won only 2 states and 8 electoral votes.¹⁹ Until his death in 1919, Roosevelt continued to play an outsized role in American life as a former president.

¹⁸ Max J. Skidmore. *After the White House* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

As one scholar notes, “Some former presidents have changed history. TR, both as president and former president, did so.”²⁰

Other presidents dedicated their lives after the White House to writing. Thomas Jefferson may be the most prominent among this group. While Jefferson certainly enshrined his legacy in the creation of the University of Virginia—and by donating his private collection to the Library of Congress—his personal letters are vitally important in that they serve as an enduring contribution to the intellectual foundation of the country. After returning to his Monticello estate in 1809, Jefferson immediately began writing thousands of letters on a range of subjects, including natural history, art, agriculture, and architecture. He shared an intimate correspondence with John Adams, and this relationship yielded many letters that feature the two erudite statesmen discussing religion, political philosophy, and classic tomes. Jefferson’s writing illuminates his “unparalleled legacy of wisdom and insight,” and underscores the extent to which his correspondence has distinguished him as a former president and influenced future generations of American thinkers.²¹

James Buchanan was another former president who adopted writing as his primary post-presidential occupation. After leaving office, he composed a meticulous analysis of his administration, entitled *Mr. Buchanan’s Administration on the Eve of Rebellion*, which amounted to an ardent defense of his policies while in office and showcased him “unapologetically fighting for exculpation of his Civil War sins.”²² After being prodded by Mark Twain, Ulysses S. Grant produced an acclaimed two-volume memoir about his

²⁰ Max J. Skidmore. *After the White House* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 94.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Leonard Benardo and Jennifer Weiss. *Citizen-in-Chief* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 22.

experiences in the Civil War that went on to become a best seller during that time. His writing was considered especially compelling for its candor about the war. Perhaps even more impressive, Grant strenuously worked on his memoirs while dying of throat cancer, which led him to write 275,000 words by hand in 10 months in order to finish before he died. Grant's memoirs remain one of the most impressive pieces of literature produced by any former president.

Calvin Coolidge also devoted much of his time as a former president to writing, though his work does not enjoy the same esteem as Grant's. After publishing his memoir, he wrote for many newspapers and magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *The American Magazine*, and McClure Newspaper Syndicate, for which he wrote a column that appeared in 60 newspapers across the country. Herbert Hoover, whose post-presidency spanned 31 years, also spent a considerable amount of time writing. He composed mostly polemical works, writing fiery denunciations of Franklin Roosevelt—*The Challenge of Liberty* (1933) and *Freedom Betrayed* (1933) were both salvos against FDR and the New Deal—that made him a prominent critic and a stalwart supporter of the isolationist wing of the Republican Party in the 1930s. As two scholars argue, “perhaps more than any other former president, Hoover sought vindication as a writer. If he could no longer shape history, he would at least have the satisfaction of interpreting it.”²³ In this way, Hoover's writing can be viewed as an attempt to justify his own politics and the policies of his administration after he left office—a tactic that will later be employed by former presidents in the modern era.

* * *

²³ Richard Norton Smith and Timothy Walch. *Farewell to the Chief* (Worland, WY: High Plains Publishing Co., 1990), 26.

In the last fifty years, presidents have used their time out of office to pursue many different activities, some utterly predictable and others highly impressive. Dwight Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson both had unremarkable lives as former presidents, retiring to their countryside homes while writing their respective memoirs and ensuring the completion of their presidential libraries. While Gerald Ford was involved in important policy debates and often wrote opinion pieces for major newspapers during his post-presidency, he was maligned for exploiting his status as a former president to attain lucrative appointments to corporate boards and to charge exorbitant speaking fees. In fact, he set a record among former presidents for the number of boards to which he belonged, including those of the American Express Company and the 20th Century Fox Film Corporation. As two scholars argue, Ford “inaugurated” the “modern-day practice of using one’s postpresidential years for excessive personal enrichment.”²⁴ With his newfound personal wealth, Ford bought three homes—including a ski chalet in Vail, Colorado—and could frequently be found honing his golf game.

Ronald Reagan was also condemned for cashing in on his presidential prestige. In one notorious episode in 1989, which came to define his brief post-presidency, Reagan accepted \$2 million to give a few twenty-minute speeches in Japan at the request of the Fujisankei Communications Group, a conservative media conglomerate. Following in Ford’s footsteps, Reagan clearly exploited his status for immense personal gain instead of pursuing the noble humanitarian activities of some of his predecessors.

Since leaving office, neither Bush has distinguished himself as a former president. George H.W. Bush has worked to raise money for humanitarian causes and has

²⁴ Leonard Benardo and Jennifer Weiss. *Citizen-in-Chief* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 64-5.

occasionally delivered speeches, but these activities have not played a prominent role in his life as a former president. From 1998 until 2003, Bush enjoyed a lucrative tenure at the Carlyle Group, an immensely prosperous private equity firm that invests in different sectors like technology and telecommunications. In addition, some scholars and journalists have speculated that Bush advised his son on issues ranging from Iraq to the Arab-Israeli conflict, though others argue that his influence was minimal.²⁵ For his part, George W. Bush, who only recently left office, has remained relatively quiet so far. Any theories on the trajectory of his post-presidency remain pure speculation.

When Bill Clinton left the presidency, he was only 54 years old, the youngest former president since Teddy Roosevelt. Clinton's relative youth, combined with his unremitting energy, might foretell an extensive and eventful life as a former president. In the last decade, Clinton has devoted much of his time to humanitarian activities, using organizations like the William J. Clinton Foundation and the Clinton Global Initiative as vehicles for addressing issues like escalating costs for HIV/AIDS drugs, widespread poverty in Africa, climate change, education, and childhood obesity. This is not to say that Clinton has not reaped large sums of money through his memoirs and various speeches and presentations. In fact, Clinton's book contract was reported to be worth about \$10 million, and he regularly commands six-figure sums for his speeches; between 2001 and 2007, Clinton received more than \$50 million in speaking fees alone.²⁶ Although he left office with more than \$11 million in legal fees, Clinton's post-presidential income has made him exorbitantly wealthy.

²⁵ Max J. Skidmore. *After the White House* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 160-1.

²⁶ Leonard Benardo and Jennifer Weiss. *Citizen-in-Chief* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 71.

In this respect, Clinton has pursued many of the same goals as Jimmy Carter, whose post-presidency has been primarily defined by his humanitarian activism. In fact, in an interview with James Fallows, Clinton acknowledged that he is consciously adopting the “Carter model”: “I had to sort of reconceive my life when I got out. I’d been in one vein for thirty years. I didn’t want to go back to elective office. I didn’t want to be a judge. And I wanted to be more active than Hoover. That’s why I mainly thought, Carter.”²⁷ This remark underscores the meticulousness with which Clinton is crafting his new image as a former president. He wants to remain on the world stage, serving as an elder statesman, humanitarian activist and, like Carter, a successful and prolific author.

One of the most intriguing aspects of Clinton’s reinvention of himself regards the form of his name. In this way, his approach is almost Nixonian: just as Nixon titled his memoirs *RN* in an attempt to conjure up feelings of esteemed former presidents like JFK, Clinton has decided to be introduced at speeches and other events as William Jefferson Clinton, rather than as the diminutive, “Bill.”²⁸ This decision seems to symbolize Clinton’s deliberate effort to brand himself as a dignified statesman and activist. By eschewing “Bill” for “William Jefferson,” Clinton is perhaps trying to jettison associations with the Monica Lewinsky scandal in favor of those with a seasoned diplomat.

It remains to be seen whether—or to what extent—Clinton’s post-presidential ambitions will be stymied by his wife’s own political career. While stumping for her during the 2008 campaign, Clinton provoked condemnation from many quarters for his insensitive comment comparing Barack Obama to Jesse Jackson. This gaffe forced the

²⁷ James Fallows, “Post-President for Life,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2003, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

campaign to minimize Clinton's involvement in the race, and in some ways the remark damaged his post-presidential image.²⁹ For his part, Fallows is certain that Clinton will lead an enterprising and intriguing life as a former president: "...it will be very much like his Administration. It will be noisy and controversial. It will rely on his skills as a speaker, a charmer, and a fundraiser. It will create both admirers and contemptuous detractors."³⁰

* * *

The notion of "writing as vindication" or catharsis—mentioned previously in the context of Herbert Hoover—is one that reemerges in the modern era as a prominent and politically significant feature of post-presidential life. Besides writing their memoirs, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan devoted most of their time to serving on executive boards, playing golf and delivering profitable speeches. On the other hand, Richard Nixon and Jimmy Carter serve as two curious examples of former presidents writing voluminously for reasons other than their own pecuniary interests. Upon closer examination, there are some striking similarities in how the two men spent their time out of office, and these similarities merit an extensive examination.

Perhaps most significantly, Nixon and Carter were both unpopular presidents who ostensibly sought to rehabilitate their public image partly through writing. In this way, they wanted to revise the prevailing historical account that consigned them to failure for the rest of their lives. They also both experienced tumultuous relations with the news media, which, after lambasting the men during their presidencies, eventually reconsidered them in light of their post-presidential accomplishments. Nixon and Carter also served in

²⁹ Leonard Benardo and Jennifer Weiss. *Citizen-in-Chief* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2009), 227-8.

³⁰ James Fallows, "Post-President for Life," *Atlantic Monthly*, March 2003, 6.

unofficial capacities for subsequent administrations, offering their foreign policy commentary in an attempt, perhaps, to be seen as sagacious former presidents. Finally, both men were highly controversial, and this quality figures prominently in each man's attempt to cultivate a certain image after his presidency. Given these similarities between Nixon and Carter, it is worth exploring the ways in which their respective post-presidencies illuminate the possibilities and perils for former presidents trying to enhance their reputation after leaving office.

On August 9, 1974, Nixon resigned from office after the Watergate scandal erupted, an event that appalled the American public and eventually instilled in people an inherent skepticism of presidents claiming expansive power. After leaving Washington, Nixon returned to his California estate in San Clemente, where he entered a depressing period of self-imposed exile. He was “at first in a state of shock, which soon gave way to inert, almost catatonic, sadness...Nixon had not given much thought to what would immediately happen after he left office.”³¹ What is more, Nixon faced more than sixty civil lawsuits in his first year out of office, but he had almost no money to finance legal services. During this time, Nixon also began a protracted legal battle over the status of his presidential papers and tapes, a dispute that lasted two decades and meant that his presidential library—established outside the jurisdiction of the National Archives and Records Administration in Yorba Linda, California—would be without his presidential papers until 2007.

By January 1975, Nixon, nearly 62 years of age, decided to stage a dramatic comeback in American political life. He sought renewal in the form of gaining the honor,

³¹ Conrad Black. *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2007), 987.

respect and admiration of the public and politicians alike. “He was obsessed with a desire for a historic rehabilitation of his own reputation and that of his Administration...and he was eager to get involved in politics again.”³² Part of what makes Nixon’s comeback unique is the extent to which he was unabashedly and expressly trying to rehabilitate his image. In order to recreate himself, Nixon executed a “carefully crafted campaign featuring hard work, willpower, luck, brass, and political skill.”³³ This rehabilitation campaign included a high profile trip to China in 1976, where Nixon met with Chinese leaders and subsequently provided a written report about his visit to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. One Nixon biographer lauds the trip as “spectacular,” “successful,” and “rewarding,” and argues that it put Nixon back on newspaper front pages in a way that demonstrated his cachet abroad.³⁴

In the coming years, Nixon also dispensed advice to various presidents on a number of foreign conflicts, including helping to negotiate the \$8.5 billion sale of AWAC aircraft to Saudi Arabia in 1981 and providing insight into how to engage with the Soviet Union during its demise. Nixon also gave well-received speeches around the country and even abroad. After he delivered an address about winning the Cold War to the American Newspaper Publishers Association in March 1986, Katharine Graham, the esteemed chairman of the *Washington Post Company*, was so in awe of Nixon that she commissioned an article called “He’s Back: The Rehabilitation of Richard Nixon,” which ran as *Newsweek*’s cover story the next month.³⁵ Graham’s decision was somewhat ironic in that the *Post* was responsible for Nixon’s demise in the first place. This was

³² Stephen Ambrose. *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery, 1973-1990* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 482.

³³ *Ibid.*, 555.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 493.

³⁵ Conrad Black. *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2007), 1035.

perhaps an indicator of how far the disgraced president had come: even the chairman of the *Post*, Nixon's ultimate nemesis, was willing to admit that he had made a startling comeback.

In the *Newsweek* article about Nixon, Larry Martz asked what constitutes "redemption for a disgraced president, the first to ever resign the office":

Is it writing an article on summitry for Foreign Affairs, and having Ronald Reagan telephone for advice? Is it appearing on Rolling Stone's list of 'Who's Hot: The New Stars in Your Future'? Is it getting a standing ovation from the American Newspaper Publishers Association, or being asked to arbitrate a labor dispute that threatened to disrupt the World Series, or being besieged by autograph seekers on a casual Burger King pit stop in New Jersey? Richard Milhous Nixon has done all those things and more in recent months; at 73, he is well launched in yet another new life, this time as the presiding sage of Saddle River, N.J.³⁶

In many ways, this article marked Nixon's transformation from disgraced president to illustrious statesman and diplomat, an accomplishment the *New York Times* had hinted at two years prior. A decade after leaving office, John Herbers wrote, Nixon "has emerged at 71 years of age as an elder statesman, commentator on foreign and domestic affairs, adviser to world leaders, a multimillionaire and a successful author and lecturer honored by audiences at home and abroad."³⁷ These articles illuminated Nixon's shrewd, calculated, and stunning campaign to revamp his image in the minds of the American public. Formerly a pariah, he had resurfaced as a widely respected political commentator and author.

While Nixon certainly made important speeches and dispensed advice to presidents, his most enduring post-presidential legacy is his prolific writing. During his twenty years

³⁶ Larry Martz, "The Road Back," *Newsweek*, 19 May 1986, 26.

³⁷ John Herbers, "After Decade, Nixon Is Gaining Favor," *New York Times*, 5 August 1984, A24.

out of office, Nixon produced nine highly successful books, some of which were weighty tomes that showcased his impressive grasp of foreign policy issues and his relentless quest to inject his viewpoint into the debate. Indeed, six of these books offered Nixon's policy prescriptions for engaging with the Soviet Union, China, and other foreign countries. For example, in 1988 Nixon published the book *1999: Victory Without War*, which presented a set of guidelines and recommendations for whoever was elected president that year. In the book, Nixon cogently argued that the Republicans should engage the Soviet Union on arms control issues, and he also advised both parties to eschew isolationism and embrace a policy of internationalism in addressing the problems of the impending twenty-first century. After lauding the book for its foreign policy insights, historian Stephen Ambrose asserted that *1999* reads more like a canned political speech than an eloquent piece of literature. But as Ambrose concedes, for Nixon's purposes, this did not really matter: "Nixon did not set out to please literary critics...He wanted to make a little money, he wanted to strengthen his reputation as a foreign policy pundit, he wanted to share his experience and practical idealism, he wanted to have an impact on the next President. He achieved these goals, and took a pardonable pride in doing so."³⁸

Nixon's successful writing career ultimately underscores the extent to which he was consciously trying to rehabilitate his image. One of the best examples of this deliberate rebranding—previously referenced in the context of Clinton—can be found in the title of his 1978 memoirs, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon*. By using *RN* as a title, Nixon was trying to evoke—and thus, associate himself with—some of the most illustrious

³⁸ Stephen Ambrose. *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery, 1973-1990* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 565.

presidents in the country's history, including TR, FDR and JFK.³⁹ For Nixon, writing books was a transparent act of self-promotion, a way to sustain his visibility and perpetually exert his influence on the trajectory of American foreign policy. (It was also a way to make money: he received \$2.5 million in advance for his memoirs.) Whenever Nixon published a book, he would embark on a promotional global book tour, giving speeches to cheering audiences and interviewing with local television stations. After Nixon finished *1999*, he was featured on various NBC shows for four consecutive days, during which he issued advice on how to achieve enduring peace in the world.⁴⁰

In some ways, these book tours represented Nixon's effort to remind people that he was, in fact, still a prominent political figure, with an abundance of foreign policy knowledge to impart to those who cared to listen. And the tours seemed to achieve this effect. While many journalists regarded his appearances on NBC as the "centerpiece of his latest resurrection," they also acknowledged his wisdom on foreign policy and his insights into contemporary American politics. As Robert B. Semple Jr. of the *New York Times* sardonically noted, "Spring. A time for new politics, new books – and Richard Nixon, who has resurfaced in this season of choices with (a) '1999: Victory Without War,' and (b) a flourish of interviews." At the same time, Semple commended Nixon's "tough, interesting commentary on foreign policy" and argued that "[he] has been around the block, and thus remains a useful early-warning system [for domestic political issues]."⁴¹

³⁹ Max J. Skidmore. *After the White House* (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 138.

⁴⁰ Thomas J. Johnson. *The Rehabilitation of Richard Nixon* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), 6.

⁴¹ Robert B. Semple Jr., "Nixon Re-Re-Redux," *New York Times*, 15 April 1988, A34.

With his steady stream of books, in conjunction with his speeches and sojourns to foreign countries, Nixon largely succeeded in rehabilitating his image by the time of his death in 1994. Nixon's "inexorable pursuit of his goal of being always at the center of events, decade after decade, and his constantly recalibrated self-promotion"⁴² had facilitated his transformation into a respected elder statesman and penetrating analyst of foreign policy issues. Richard Nixon, once the avatar of corruption and immorality, had become a renowned author and diplomat. As Stephen Ambrose writes, "What had seemed impossible in the summer of 1974 had happened by the summer of 1990. Nixon was respectable, even honored, certainly admired."⁴³

Upon Nixon's death in April 1994, the press retrospectives on his life confirmed the extent to which he had rehabilitated his image since leaving office. *Time* put Nixon on its cover—under the headline "The Last Testament of Richard Nixon"—and included in the issue an excerpt from his last book, *Beyond Peace*, which the magazine advertised as his "parting advice" to Bill Clinton. In an article for the issue, John F. Stacks wrote that Nixon "kept traveling and thinking and talking to the world's leaders" in order to "reclaim a respected place in American public life..." Stacks concluded the piece by proclaiming Nixon "much more than a Watergate man. And he leaves another, brighter monument: his own superhuman determination and stamina."⁴⁴ Both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, while unwilling to excuse Nixon for Watergate, acknowledged how far the disgraced president had come since leaving office. The *Times* editorialized that "he endured after that disgrace...By sheer will he clawed his way back

⁴² Conrad Black. *Richard M. Nixon: A Life in Full* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2007), 1057.

⁴³ Stephen Ambrose. *Nixon: Ruin and Recovery, 1973-1990* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 575.

⁴⁴ John F. Stacks, "Victory in Defeat," *Time*, 2 May 1994.

to a semblance of respectability, turning himself into an elder statesman and an adviser to Presidents, Bill Clinton included.”⁴⁵ Previously Nixon’s detractor, the *Post* also conceded that he had engineered an impressive post-presidency for himself: “Mr. Nixon always liked to say that he was ‘not a quitter.’ The extraordinary, redemptive journey he undertook from shame to stature in the last two decades of his life proved that he was surely right about that.”⁴⁶

These assessments of Nixon’s life demonstrate his success in revamping his image after his presidency. By the time of his death, many news outlets were willing to concede that while Nixon (rightly) left office humiliated and in despair, he had some impressive accomplishments in the twenty years after. As one *Time* article argued, “the verdict on his life and career was becoming, if not softer, at least more complicated.”⁴⁷ Given Nixon’s dramatic fall from grace after Watergate, that was no small feat.

But just as Nixon chose to catapult himself back into American political life after his presidency, so did Carter. To be sure, their respective situations upon leaving office were different in crucial respects; most significantly, while Nixon was forced to resign from office due to Watergate, Carter lost an election because of voter discontent. However, in an ironic twist, it was Nixon who would sustain an increasingly positive reputation in the press and among the public during his twenty years as a former president. Carter, on the other hand, would experience a much different fate.

⁴⁵ “Richard Nixon,” *New York Times*, 24 April 1994, A16.

⁴⁶ “Richard Milhous Nixon,” *Washington Post*, 24 April 1996, A24.

⁴⁷ John F. Stacks, “Victory in Defeat,” *Time*, 2 May 1994.

Chapter Two: “Is There Life After Disaster?”

...by August, 1979, if the President had been set upon by a pack of wild dogs, a good portion of the press would have sided with the dogs and declared that he had provoked the attack.¹

I personally don't give a goddamn what you people do. If I had my way, I'd ask the fucking Ayatollah to keep fifty reporters and give us our diplomats back. Then you people who have all the answers could figure out how to get them out.²

In order to understand the media coverage of Carter after his presidency, it is crucial to briefly examine the effects of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal on the relationship between the press and the president. While these events cannot completely explain the vicissitudes in press coverage of Carter, their respective contexts offer an overarching analytical framework, especially regarding the intense press scrutiny of Carter when he left office. Viewed through the historical lens of Vietnam and Watergate, the persistently scathing portrait of Carter as a failed president seems more understandable, if not more justifiable. Both of these events profoundly altered the relationship between the press and the president, and Carter happened to be one of the first victims of a press corps with a renewed penchant for the aggressive reporting immortalized by journalists like David Halberstam, Bob Woodward, and Carl Bernstein.

During the Vietnam War, the relationship between the press and the presidency became considerably more fraught and adversarial than it had been. Indeed, both print and television journalists covering Vietnam played a crucial role in exposing Lyndon Johnson's calamitous and allegedly deceitful management of the war. In particular, an aggressive press revealed the contradictions between the U.S. government's portrayal of

¹ Jody Powell. *The Other Side of the Story* (New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc.), 108.

² *Ibid.*, 229. This quote was Powell's recollection of his response to Sandy Socolow of CBS, who was protesting Carter's recommendation that news reporters should "minimize...their presence and their activities" in Iran during the hostage crisis.

the war and the reality on the ground: “The assertions that the war was going well were undercut by the nightly pictures of bloodied soldiers on stretchers being evacuated by helicopters, other scenes of carnage, and reports from the battlefield that the enemy was proving elusive...No other war had been reported this way.”³

This press coverage generated real conflict with the Johnson administration. Reporters were audaciously challenging Johnson’s portrayal of the war, and this assertiveness had serious implications for the future of press-president relations. The Vietnam War had witnessed reporters at their most aggressive and confrontational. Partly as a result, Johnson experienced an increasingly strained relationship with the press itself and, ultimately more damaging to his political future, with the American public. As Louis Liebovich notes, “...Johnson could not control or influence reporters, and he could not find an honorable solution in Vietnam. His administration had not only tangled the nation inextricably in Southeast Asia, but he had lied about casualties and the progress of the war. This would also be a legacy that Americans would not soon forget.”⁴

In this way, the Vietnam War—and the press coverage of it—left the American public disillusioned and newly skeptical of their leaders’ ability to govern effectively and responsibly. Instead of viewing the president as an infallible human being who governs from on high—and thus remains above reproach—the American public began to adopt a more critical attitude, exhibiting a willingness to perceive the commander in chief as merely mortal, with all the attendant political and ethical foibles that phrase implies. Liebovich aptly characterizes this change in perception among the American public:

³ Louis Liebovich. *The Press and the Modern Presidency* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

The president had become not a kindly, understanding leader, but a scheming politician, who lied at every turn and whose sole motivation was to strengthen his political power. Or worse, he was a bumbling incompetent, who gained office because he was the grudging choice from a field of losers. From its zenith in the last year of the Kennedy era, the presidency had sunk to a new twentieth-century low. The repudiation of Lyndon Johnson, followed closely by the Watergate scandal that brought down both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, damaged the presidency for a generation to come.⁵

After the tenacious reporting in Vietnam, the success of Woodward and Bernstein in exposing the chicanery and moral depravity of Richard Nixon further transformed the paradigm dictating how journalists should interact with the president. Building on the press legacy in Vietnam, Woodward and Bernstein employed intrepid reporting to demonstrate that it is permissible to be aggressive in writing about the president; that an inherent skepticism of a politician's motives is, in fact, a healthy characteristic for reporters to adopt; and that, indeed, it is *essential* for journalists to be skeptical of the president and his motives. In this respect, Woodward and Bernstein enhanced the prestige of reporters and demonstrated their relevance to the American public:

Reporters, who had always been in the background, asking questions and reporting stories, were now in the foreground. What the press was thinking and reporting became as much a source of interest to the public as the presidency itself. No aspect of the press and presidency emerged unchallenged after the events of 1971 to 1974.⁶

Therefore, after Vietnam, Watergate served to reinforce the notion of the press as a public watchdog, with journalists playing the role of unrelenting investigators who dissected the president's every action. If the journalists failed to serve as the guardians of democracy, the thinking went, then who would? Both Johnson and Nixon had

⁵ Louis Liebovich. *The Press and the Modern Presidency* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 65-6.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

definitively proved that presidents could not always be trusted. Rex Granum, a former reporter who served as deputy press secretary during the Carter administration, emphasizes the sense of frustration reporters felt after Watergate, a sentiment he believes affected their coverage of Carter: “These were the same reporters who had been lied to by Nixon and his staff. The reporters took it personally. They had been burned, and burned very badly.”⁷ After having been deceived by Nixon, therefore, journalists began to see it as their duty to highlight the president’s shortcomings and flaws, which would, perhaps, prevent another catastrophic episode like Watergate. Inevitably, this post-Watergate paradigm of the press aggressively trying to expose the president’s every misstep exacerbated the adversarial and, occasionally, hostile relationship between the two institutions that had started with Vietnam. As Liebovich notes, “Coupled with the press management present during the Vietnam-dominated Johnson Administration, Watergate brought a new aura to the White House pressroom. Antagonism toward and mistrust of every president who succeeded Nixon dogged press-president relations.”⁸

This increasing focus among reporters on the president’s shortcomings both contributed to and resulted from the American public’s cynicism about presidential power. The distrust of elected officials after Vietnam and Watergate crystallized by the 1980s, when reporters “personalized the presidency,” focusing not merely on a president’s policy failings, but on the flaws in his personal life. Indeed, certain aspects of a president’s character that were previously off limits—his morality, personal principles and general idiosyncrasies—suddenly became fodder for journalists eager to satiate a public increasingly preoccupied with the minutiae of presidential life. In this way,

⁷ Interview with Rex Granum in Washington, D.C., 3/2/10.

⁸ Louis Liebovich. *The Press and the Modern Presidency* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000), 91.

reporters “looked for the kind of negative images that the public expected and fanned the cynicism.”⁹ In his book *The Press and the Carter Presidency*, Mark Rozell cites the work of scholar James Sterling Young, who perceptively comments on this shift in political reportage after Vietnam and Watergate: “This regular public airing of the president’s political secrets and craft, this turning of spotlights on the seamier side of political leadership, and this continuing watchfulness for impeachable behavior were hardly part of the citizenry’s political education about Franklin Roosevelt and his White House.”¹⁰

Eleanor Clift, who covered Carter’s presidency for *Newsweek* and has written about him for the magazine during his post-presidency as well, argues that this journalistic tendency to focus on a president’s flaws became “part of the job” for reporters covering the White House. According to Clift, “The White House press corps are trained to be attack dogs and ‘gotcha’ police,” which, she maintains, caused reporters to “lose sight of the bigger issues [Carter] was trying to get across.”¹¹ This sentiment about the press corps was echoed by Barry Jagoda, a trained broadcast journalist who served as a special assistant for media and communications strategy in the Carter administration. In explaining the negative coverage of Carter’s presidency, Jagoda notes that “Journalists have a professional responsibility to look for the warts in a situation. Of course, after Carter’s first year, there were plenty of warts because the country had a lot of problems.”¹²

⁹ Louis Liebovich. *Richard Nixon, Watergate, and the Press* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 121.

¹⁰ Mark J. Rozell. *The Press and the Carter Presidency* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 232.

¹¹ Interview with Eleanor Clift in Washington, D.C., 3/1/10.

¹² Phone interview with Barry Jagoda, 2/15/10.

With the shame and treachery of Watergate still resonant, the press held Carter to exceedingly high ethical standards. Mindful of Nixon's moral failings, Carter had run for presidential office promising he would govern by those high standards. He said he would never tell a lie, and repeatedly assured Americans they could expect nothing less than honesty and transparency in his government. These promises had the effect of elevating—and validating—press expectations: “If in the immediate post-Watergate context journalists expected highly ethical conduct by public officials, Jimmy Carter’s rhetoric heightened these expectations.”¹³ Since Carter had made such explicit promises of transparency to journalists—and, by extension, to the public—it was a devastating blow to his image every time he failed to live up to those promises. As Eleanor Clift notes, “Carter ran on ‘I’ll never lie to you.’ He set a standard that was humanly impossible to achieve.”¹⁴

Therefore, when Carter (inevitably) did not fulfill all of his promises, the press had an excuse to assail him for betraying the nation and acting contrary to his own words. Carter’s persistent failure to honor his lofty campaign pledges would eventually become a common press critique of his presidency, and in this way the post-Watergate skepticism of the president’s honesty had negative ramifications for his image in the media, despite his best intentions.

While Carter’s tumultuous relationship with the press cannot fully be explained using the Vietnam and Watergate paradigm, these events have carried with them profound implications for press-president relations, and therefore Carter is, to some extent, a victim of this deteriorating relationship. In fact, Carter himself acknowledged that both Vietnam

¹³ Mark J. Rozell. *The Press and the Carter Presidency* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 226.

¹⁴ Interview with Eleanor Clift in Washington, D.C., 3/1/10.

and Watergate heavily influenced the press coverage of his presidency. In an interview in November 1982, he offered the following assessment: “Finally, there’s a conviction in the press, at least there was when I was in office, that since Nixon and Johnson had lied or misled the public concerning Vietnam and the bombing of Cambodia and Watergate and so forth, surely we must be doing the same thing. If they investigate it long enough, they would discover these skeletons in our closet.”¹⁵ Clearly, Carter should have realized at the outset of his term that he would be confronted with a more adversarial press determined to expose his flaws. Given his tense relationship with the press, though, it is apparent that Carter did not quite grasp the implications of Vietnam and Watergate before it was too late.

* * *

Even after Carter lost the 1980 presidential election to Ronald Reagan, the U.S. print news media criticism of Carter was intense. In almost all accounts, Carter was a feckless and ineffectual president, a politician who simply failed to deliver the strong leadership and coherent vision the Democrats needed to capitalize on their majority in Congress. Writing about the Carter presidency in *Time*, Lance Morrow assailed Carter as “an irrelevance to his own party,” and continued, “He was never a Democratic leader either in blood or inclination.”¹⁶ In another assessment of Carter’s presidency, Timothy Schellhardt wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that “There was a kind of hollowness about Jimmy Carter’s administration, from beginning to end. He seldom seemed to articulate a clear idea of just what he wanted to do and how he planned to do it...he didn’t

¹⁵ Ed. Don Richardson. *Conversations with Carter* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., 1998), 242.

¹⁶ Lance Morrow, “Is There Life After Disaster?” *Time*, 17 November 1980, 44.

communicate purpose.”¹⁷ Bill Shipp, a columnist at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, offered another indictment of Carter after his defeat in 1980: “For the first time, millions of Americans began to truly believe what they already suspected: Jimmy Carter as president just couldn’t get it right. Everything he touched seemed destined to fail...it seems likely that the next president from the deep South can be expected to take office shortly after the year 2300 A.D.”¹⁸

Harsh criticism from the press was nothing new for Carter. While the press initially praised his unassuming and populist style of governance, throughout Carter’s presidency, the media coverage became increasingly negative.¹⁹ Indeed, after a brief honeymoon with the press, Carter found himself besieged within the first year of his term, and the administration’s relationship with journalists deteriorated markedly thereafter. There is no consensus on precisely when this tension culminated to produce the sustained negative coverage that would characterize much of Carter’s term. The “Lance affair,” however, served as one watershed in the portrayal of Carter in the news media. After this controversy unfolded in July 1977, journalists began to write about Carter with a renewed sense of skepticism that resulted in highly critical news coverage.²⁰ As Carter himself acknowledges, “It is impossible to overestimate the damage inflicted on my administration by the charges leveled against Bert Lance.”²¹

After winning the 1976 presidential election, Carter had appointed Lance as the Director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Lance was one of his close

¹⁷ Timothy D. Schellhardt, “The Jimmy Carter Legacy,” *Wall Street Journal*, 6 November 1980, 32.

¹⁸ Bill Shipp, “How Carter and Talmadge Took Defeat,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 8 November 1980, 2B.

¹⁹ Mark J. Rozell. *The Press and the Carter Presidency* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹ Jimmy Carter. *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982,) 127.

friends and a fellow Georgian, and Carter had chosen Lance both for his business acumen and his personal loyalty. In his memoir, Carter emphasizes his intimate relationship with Lance, writing that “It is difficult for me to explain how close Bert was to me or how much I have depended on him. Even my closest friends in Georgia have never fully understood the extent of our relationship.”²² Soon enough, these close ties would end up tarnishing Carter’s image as an honest leader.

After *Time* reported in May 1977 that Lance was mired in debt, journalists and congressional leaders began conducting extensive investigations into his personal finances. Shortly thereafter, some media outlets launched accusations that Lance had committed financial misconduct as a state banker in Georgia. These charges, which involved millions of dollars in dubious bank loans, raised manifold concerns about Lance’s potential conflicts of interest, as well as about his capacity to serve as Carter’s budget director. On a broader level, the debacle prompted serious questions about whether Lance’s poor ethical decisions as a bank manager in Georgia rendered him unfit to work in Carter’s cabinet. In the end, Lance resigned in late September 1977 amid escalating controversy, even though he had not been formally charged. The resignation in effect constituted an effort to stem the shame and embarrassment of the affair before it further damaged the Carter administration.

The Lance affair spanned three excruciating months, during which Carter was consistently under fire for his decision in nominating Lance. Public opinion polls showed that a majority of Americans thought Lance should resign as budget director,²³ and each

²² *Ibid.*, 128.

²³ “67% Say Lance Should Resign,” *Washington Post*, 11 September 1977, A17.

day seemed to produce yet another news story raising some new question about Lance's financial improprieties.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of this scandal was the way it contradicted Carter's campaign promises and, more generally, his image. As previously mentioned, during the 1976 election, Carter had pledged to implement stringent ethical standards and absolute transparency for his administration—an attempt to eradicate the vestiges of public distrust after the Watergate scandal; in this light, therefore, Lance's wrongdoing seemed a particularly damning blow for the president.²⁴ Carter made grand promises to the American people, and then one of his closest advisers was accused of receiving questionable bank loans totaling several million dollars. This seemed like an explicit breach of public trust, and Carter suffered for it. In his memoirs, he recognizes the conflicting public perceptions of him when the Lance affair broke: “There were never any allegations from any source that Bert Lance had behaved improperly while he was part of our administration in Washington, but I had placed such public emphasis on high standards of ethics and morality that I was very vulnerable to political damage from the charges against him.”²⁵

Many of the major media outlets seized on the Lance controversy in order to assail Carter for compromising his values in nominating and subsequently defending his friend. An article in *U.S. News and World Report* encapsulated many of the complaints about Carter: “The President's personal judgment is coming into greater question, at least temporarily, as a result of his insistence that Lance was competent and above suspicion. Carter is being criticized for seeming to ignore the high ethical standards he himself had

²⁴ Mark J. Rozell. *The Press and the Carter Presidency* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 56.

²⁵ Jimmy Carter. *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982), 130.

insisted upon in his administration.”²⁶ Describing the mounting frustration with Carter’s handling of the affair, Hugh Sidey of *Time* wrote that the president’s insistence that Lance’s actions were ethical was “an insult to almost everyone’s intelligence...Lance’s actions are so far from the norm as to be bizarre. Thus as Carter and his people have argued Lance’s case, they have painted themselves to be either slightly dishonest or grossly uncomprehending. In either environment trust wilts.”²⁷

Throughout the Lance affair, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* repeatedly called for Lance to resign while questioning Carter’s hypocritical decision to defend someone who apparently violated his administration’s professed honesty and transparency. In one editorial, the *Post* wrote that “Having laid great emphasis on his administration’s ethical standards, Mr. Carter cannot now carry on a prolonged defense of Mr. Lance without suffering great erosion of his own public standing. Mr. Carter is a stubborn man, and perhaps he does not fully see that truth.”²⁸ The *Times* proved equally critical of Carter, arguing in an editorial that his conduct during the Lance affair had been characterized by “dubious judgments and miscalculations,” and questioning his “sagacity as a politician.”²⁹ All this criticism only served to damage Carter’s image, reinforcing the idea that he would occasionally compromise his honesty and integrity in extenuating circumstances.

Curiously, some of the Southern newspapers were much more forgiving of Carter for the Lance affair. Most prominent among Carter’s defenders was the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, which vociferously pleaded the president’s case in several editorials during

²⁶ “Headaches Pile Up For Carter in Lance Affair,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 19 September 1977, 25.

²⁷ Hugh Sidey, “Jimmy Behind Closed Doors,” *Time*, 19 September 1977.

²⁸ “When Will Bert Lance Resign?” *Washington Post*, 8 September 1977, A26.

²⁹ “The Lance Hotfoot,” *New York Times*, 8 September 1977, A26.

the affair. For example, Bill Shipp, an associate editor at the paper, wrote that Lance was “a victim of a barrage of innuendoes.”³⁰ In an editorial titled “About Lynch Mobs,” the *Journal* argued that there was still no evidence of Lance’s alleged financial improprieties, and that the “climate of dealing with the matter has, in some circles, taken on virtually a lynch mob psychology.”³¹ In particular, the *Journal* derided the *New York Times* for claiming that it was Lance’s duty to prove his innocence.

This tendency for Southern newspapers to defend Carter and Lance can perhaps be explained by a strong bond of regional loyalty, which produced an affinity with Carter that was basically nonexistent among editors at larger newspapers in the North. Indeed, for many Southerners, Carter was considered their native son, and any criticism of him was therefore issued with more reluctance and circumspection. To be sure, Southern newspapers like the *Journal* condemned Carter for his deficient leadership and inability to work with Congress. But on some matters—especially those with local or regional resonance like the Lance affair—Southern newspapers exhibited more skepticism of major newspapers’ claims of Carter’s general shortcomings.

This loyalty from Southern editors was also evident at the end of Carter’s presidency, when many newspapers or magazines were branding Carter as a failure. For example, after Carter lost the 1980 election, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* defended “the first ever Georgian elected president” from the mistreatment he received from Georgia’s Democratic Party. The *Journal* editorialized that “...honored he should be. We believe most Democrats in Georgia would feel the same way. He led them for four years as governor and for four years as president of the United States, and he deserves recognition

³⁰ Bill Shipp, “Who in Washington Stands to Gain if Bert Lance Falls?” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 11 August 1977, 4A.

³¹ “About Lynch Mobs,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 11 August 1977, 4A.

from his party for that – despite the petty jealousies of a handful of spiteful leaders.”³² In another editorial the day after the election, the *Journal* argued against viewing Carter’s loss as “an anti-Carter reaction” and as a “personal humiliation for Jimmy Carter. We doubt that any incumbent president could have won under the circumstances; we feel sure that no Democrat could have done better.”³³

The notable regional differences in media coverage will be discussed more later, but these examples should suffice to establish the fact that while press criticism of Carter was virtually universal at times, in some important respects regional loyalty led newspapers like the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* to exercise more restraint in judging their native son. Elizabeth Kurylo, who covered Carter for the *Journal* for fifteen years of his post-presidency, acknowledges this sentiment among some Southern newspapers:

“Newspapers in Georgia in particular were proud of the fact there was a Southerner in the White House.”³⁴

In retrospect, the Lance affair would serve as a microcosm of one of the biggest problems during the Carter presidency: the impression that the White House was occupied by an insular band of Georgians who looked askance at Washington politics and ultimately vested trust only in each other. According to this view, Lance enjoyed Carter’s stalwart support precisely because they were old Georgia friends. Predictably, this critique was more prevalent in national publications than in those based in Georgia. For example, *Time* was particularly censorious of Carter for appointing so many newcomers from Georgia to serve in his cabinet. In one article about Carter’s chief of

³² “Sore Losers,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 10 December 1980, 4A.

³³ “The Election Outcome,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 5 November 1980, 4A.

³⁴ Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/13/10.

staff, Hamilton Jordan, the magazine wrote that “The staff Carter transplanted to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue from his Georgia-based presidential campaign was from the start young, inexperienced and fundamentally disorganized. Worse, its members came to Washington with chips on their shoulders about the city’s entrenched political establishment.”³⁵ *U.S. News and World Report* reaffirmed this criticism in arguing that Carter’s staff was “dominated by young Georgians” who were “still trying to get a grasp on Washington.”³⁶

Criticizing Carter and his staff for their outsider status and apparent inability to “grasp” Washington politics became one of the most prominent themes in the press coverage of his presidency. As Eleanor Clift notes, “He came to Washington as an outsider. He surrounded himself with the Georgians. There was a lot of ferocious backlash to this outsider looking in.”³⁷ Indeed, journalists were constantly highlighting Carter’s fundamental misconception of the way things worked in Washington—the power brokering, political favors, and extensive social ties that bound the city’s political luminaries together. As one *Newsweek* article put it, “Carter proved unadept at most of those arts [of bartering and diplomacy]—at massaging Congressional egos, at trading pork-barrel projects for votes, at mobilizing public opinion behind his programs.”³⁸

Carter had no interest in ingratiating himself with these people, and his purist vision of government made no room for the kind of political deals that constitute the essence of Washington politics. Rex Granum, himself a native Georgian, concedes that the administration perhaps miscalculated in the way it approached Washington: “If we were

³⁵ “Here Comes Mr. Jordan,” *Time*, 30 July 1979.

³⁶ “Carter’s Woes – Any Way Out?” *U.S. News and World Report*, 7 November 1977.

³⁷ Interview with Eleanor Clift in Washington, D.C., 3/1/10.

³⁸ Peter Goldman, “Taming the Congress,” *Newsweek*, 26 January 1981, 38.

doing it all over again, would we approach D.C. differently and pay more attention to its mores? Sure.” But Granum also argued that Carter’s campaign was “predicated on being different.”³⁹

This distaste for power brokering carried severe consequences for Carter’s relationship with Congress. These problems are brought into sharp relief by an August 18, 1978 memorandum that Maryon Allen, a freshman Democratic senator and later *Washington Post* columnist, sent to Frank Moore, who was serving as Carter’s assistant for Congressional Liaison. Allen wrote the memo in response to an article in the *Post* that quoted Carter’s Secretary of Agriculture saying the “Administration will begin disciplining its more strident congressional critics...” The memo is strikingly blunt, and therefore deserves to be reproduced at length:

...I have been continually frustrated in my attempts to communicate with high-ranking appointees in this Administration – my Administration – who now have the unmitigated gall to criticize the members of the Legislative Branch because they do not react with Pavlovian instincts when the Administration rings its bell...

If the President wants to enhance his image by getting tough, tell him to begin with his Cabinet members by ordering them and their subordinates to be responsive to the Members of Congress, or else...It is inconceivable to me that it has never occurred to the Administration that any lack of responsiveness on the part of the Congress to the desires of the Administration is in direct proportion to the lack of responsiveness to the Legislative Branch by the Administration.⁴⁰

Of course, the press had already taken note of the problems Allen describes, and it frequently criticized Carter for his ineptitude in dealing with Congress. In assessing Carter’s defeat in 1980, for example, *Newsweek* wrote that Carter’s “contempt for the political establishment was as thick as his Georgia accent...His relations with a Congress

³⁹ Interview with Rex Granum in Washington, D.C., 3/2/10.

⁴⁰ Memo, Maryon Allen to Frank Moore, 8/18/78, White House Central Files, “1/20/77-1/20/81,” Box PR-9, Jimmy Carter Library (hereafter JCL).

controlled by his own party were the worst of any President in modern history. His refusal to compromise, consult or curry favor on Capitol Hill first baffled, then outraged legislators, who retaliated by bottling up his programs.”⁴¹ Neither Carter nor his staff possessed a solid understanding of “Congress or its odd rituals,”⁴² and this shortcoming had dire repercussions for the president’s legislative agenda and public perceptions of him. Reflecting on Carter’s presidency, Edward Walsh, who covered the president for the *Washington Post*, wrote that “He ended his term with precious few passionate allies on Capitol Hill, the burial ground of so many of his good intentions.”⁴³ In fact, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* went so far as to suggest that Carter’s defeat in 1980 could be primarily attributed to his inability to work with Congress. The article called Carter’s attitude toward the legislature “belligerent,” and argued that the “strain with Congress would seem in the long run to have been more damaging than the less subtle events that produced sensational headlines.”⁴⁴ Criticism of Carter’s relations with Congress clearly transcended regional loyalties. Both the national and regional newspapers recognized the president’s failure to work successfully with Congress and censured him for this major shortcoming.

Carter and his advisers were clearly aware of the tension with Congress, and they continually sought ways to improve the relationship. In a memo from Press Secretary Jody Powell to Carter, Powell tried to prepare the president for an interview with *U.S. News and World Report* by admonishing him to avoid “knocking the Congress directly; but instead expressing your understanding of the great pressure that is exerted on

⁴¹ Allan J. Mayer, “Carter: A Long Day’s Night,” *Newsweek*, 17 November 1980, 29.

⁴² “Assessing a Presidency,” *Time*, 18 August 1980.

⁴³ Edward Walsh, “A Flawed Presidency of Good Intentions,” *Washington Post*, 18 January 1981, C1.

⁴⁴ Dallas Lee, “Economy, Kennedy Fight May Explain How Carter Lost Vote Favor,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 9 November 1980, 1A.

individual members and your willingness to take the political heat for holding the line...”⁴⁵ Hamilton Jordan also stressed to Carter the importance of being patient and “sensitive to the problems in Congress” when setting a legislative agenda.⁴⁶ Despite the administration’s best efforts, the strained relationship with Congress dogged Carter throughout his presidency, hampering his legislative program and further alienating him from Washington social circles. As Carter’s pollster Pat Caddell put it, “You have been had by the Congress...Members openly flaunt their refusal to accede to your requests.”⁴⁷

Throughout Carter’s presidency, journalists only grew more critical of him, highlighting what they saw as the president’s inept and indecisive handling of the major crises that plagued the country. With each new foreign and domestic crisis, the critiques by the press reinforced some familiar themes: Carter was an inept and weak leader, one who lacked a clear and consistent vision for the future of the country. For example, condemning Carter’s failure to persuade Western European nations to sanction Iran during the hostage crisis in 1980, *Time* noted in an editorial that “Probably no factor has more impeded America’s ability to lead the alliance in the current crises than the disdain that allied leaders have for Jimmy Carter. He is generally regarded as being inept and naïve.”⁴⁸

During the Iranian hostage crisis, Carter was indeed perceived as incapable of providing the requisite leadership to rescue the American hostages being held at the U.S. embassy in Iran. After his disastrous rescue mission to save the hostages on April 24,

⁴⁵ Memo, Jody Powell to Jimmy Carter, 5/23/77, Jody Powell’s Files, “Memoranda: President Carter, 4/1/77-5/24/77 [CF/OA 55],” Box 39, JCL.

⁴⁶ Memo, Hamilton Jordan to Jimmy Carter, 3/77, Hamilton Jordan’s Files, “Memoranda: Early Months’ Performance, Hamilton Jordan Memos to President Carter, 1977,” Box 34A, JCL.

⁴⁷ Memo, Patrick Caddell to Jimmy Carter, 4/4/78, Jody Powell Papers, “Memos from Pat Caddell,” Box 30, JCL.

⁴⁸ “Storm Over the Alliance,” *Time*, 28 April 1980, 15.

1980—which resulted in the deaths of eight American military servicemen—*Time* ran a cover story titled “Debacle in the Desert.” The magazine wrote that “his image as inept had been renewed. Already hurt by mounting economic difficulties at home, the President now had a new embarrassment abroad. The failure in the desert could prove to be a blow to his re-election hopes.”⁴⁹ Carter clearly agonized over the entire crisis, and he felt an acute sense of shame after the mission’s foundering. In his memoir, he writes that he is “still haunted by memories...” of the botched rescue mission and the disrepute he experienced upon learning of its lethal failure.⁵⁰

The obsessive press coverage of the hostage crisis certainly did not help Carter’s mental and emotional stability—nor did it improve his chances for reelection. Throughout the 444-day ordeal, both television and print journalists repeatedly presented images of incensed Iranians chanting anti-American slogans in the streets of Tehran. For example, four days before the 1980 election, the *Americus Times-Recorder*, a Georgia-based newspaper, ran a large photograph on the front page that showed crowds of irate protesters yelling “Death to Reagan, Death to Carter.”⁵¹ These types of images—and the accompanying stories—only reinforced the impression that Carter could not summon the strong leadership skills needed to rescue the 53 American hostages in Iran.

Carter was equally criticized for his management of the economy during his tenure. In order to address an inflation rate that had skyrocketed to 18 percent by March 1980, Carter sought a balanced budget through \$13 billion in cuts, stringent credit limits, and a

⁴⁹ “Debacle in the Desert,” *Time*, 5 May 1980.

⁵⁰ Jimmy Carter. *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982,) 518.

⁵¹ “Candidates Campaign Furiously As Vote Nears,” *Americus Times-Recorder*, 31 October 1980, 1.

ten-cent per gallon gasoline tax.⁵² The *Wall Street Journal* disapproved of Carter's plan, claiming that he was not taking realistic steps to stem the crisis, and that his massive budget cuts constituted "an even bigger fraud than we expected."⁵³ In covering Carter's response to this economic crisis, Terence Smith of the *New York Times* suggested that public frustration with the economy may have caused the most damage to his bid for reelection.⁵⁴ Whether or not the economy was *the* definitive issue that precipitated Carter's defeat, press criticism of his economic policy—or, as some would argue, lack thereof—persisted throughout his term, severely impairing his image as an effective leader who knew how to remedy rising inflation.

While journalists often attacked Carter for specific problems—the Lance affair, the hostage crisis, and the economy—some of the most caustic criticism of him was directed at his character. In the press narrative, many of Carter's idiosyncrasies can help explain why he proved incapable of dealing with the aforementioned specific problems. As Barry Jagoda notes, "He was trained as an engineer, and he saw things in a problem-solving way. He was impatient with people who had objections."⁵⁵

This occupational background helps explain the personal traits Carter exhibited as president: he was a detail-oriented, obsessively meticulous man who was more interested in managing the vast bureaucracy of government than in projecting an inspiring image of America around which the public could mobilize. Viewing Carter's presidency through his training as a naval engineer, Martin Schram of the *Washington Post* wrote that "His was the clockwork presidency. He was chief engineer and operating officer of the United

⁵² Mark J. Rozell. *The Press and the Carter Presidency* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989), 170.

⁵³ "One-Day Budget Cuts," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 March 1980, 24.

⁵⁴ Terence Smith, "Carter Post-Mortem: Debate Hurt But Wasn't Only Cause for Defeat," *New York Times*, 9 November 1980, 1.

⁵⁵ Phone interview with Barry Jagoda, 2/15/10.

States of America. His role, as he seemed to see it, was to study it all and then engineer the very best program a country could want, send it up to Capitol Hill for enactment, and then wait to sign the measure after congressional enactment.”⁵⁶ Carter’s meticulous and relentlessly focused nature made establishing relationships with journalists considerably more difficult. “The contrarian nature of the journalist did not sit well with the goal-oriented engineer,” Jagoda says. “Journalists’ questions would seem off target... Carter was too busy pursuing his goals to make time for humoring the press.”⁵⁷ Rex Granum reiterates this sentiment: “Did his personality naturally lend itself to his going to have a stiff drink with a columnist after work? No, that’s not who he was, nor who he is.”⁵⁸

Moreover, Carter suffered from an inability to see the larger picture, to understand where the country had been and where it was going. As a result, he was perpetually mired in the details of governing. While this attention to detail sometimes proved a remarkable asset—as in Carter’s historic brokering of the Camp David Accords, perhaps the hallmark of his presidency—other times it hindered his ability to communicate a basic vision for the country. As one *Time* article put it, “In his own inexperience and uncertainty, the President could not define a mission for his Government, a purpose for the country and the means of getting there.”⁵⁹

Perhaps one of the shrewdest analyses of Carter’s character and the attendant problems it caused for his administration is James Fallows’s article “The Passionless Presidency,” which ran in the *Atlantic Monthly* in May 1979. Fallows had been the chief speechwriter for the first two years of Carter’s presidency, but after mounting frustration

⁵⁶ Martin Schram, “Carter: Toll of a Clockwork Presidency,” *Washington Post*, 27 October 1980, A1.

⁵⁷ Phone interview with Barry Jagoda, 2/15/10.

⁵⁸ Interview with Rex Granum in Washington, D.C., 3/2/10.

⁵⁹ “Assessing a Presidency,” *Time*, 18 August 1980.

with the administration, he resigned in order to work as a journalist. There are several passages in “The Passionless Presidency” that illuminate how Carter’s meticulous nature imperiled his ability to govern:

Carter came into office determined to set a rational plan for his time, but soon showed in practice that he was still the detail-man used to running his own warehouse, the perfectionist accustomed to thinking that to do a job right you must do it yourself...

One explanation [for Carter’s inability to excite people about his programs] is that Carter has not given us an idea to follow. The central idea of the Carter Administration is Jimmy Carter himself, his own mixture of traits, since the only thing that finally gives coherence to the items of his creed is that he happens to believe them all...

I came to think that Carter believes fifty things, but no one thing. He holds explicit, thorough positions on every issue under the sun, but he has no large view of the relations between them...

Carter thinks in lists, not arguments; as long as items are there, their order does not matter, nor does the hierarchy among them...

But for the part of his job that involves leadership, Carter’s style of thought cripples him. He thinks he ‘leads’ by choosing the correct policy; but he fails to project a vision larger than the problem he is tackling at the moment...

...Carter’s cast of mind: his view of problems as technical, not historical, his lack of curiosity about how the story turned out before. He wanted to analyze the “correct” answer, not to understand the intangible irrational forces that had skewed all previous answers.⁶⁰

In these passages, Fallows touches on several of the themes that appear again and again in press criticism of Carter: his lack of a vision, inability to inspire, obsessive attention to detail, and myopic view of the larger course of history. In one particularly telling (and comical) instance of the meticulous behavior suggested in Fallows’s article, the president wrote a note to his staff reprimanding them for incorrectly using personal pronouns in their memos: “A matter of grammar: There is a persistent error which continues to cause a problem for Susan and me (not Susan and I) in correspondence and

⁶⁰ James Fallows, “The Passionless Presidency,” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1979.

memos coming to the Oval Office. Please read the attached papers” (underline his).⁶¹

The attached papers were photocopied pages of a grammar book, which presented the correct uses of personal pronouns.

Echoing some of the themes outlined in the Fallows piece, Dallas Lee of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* argued that Carter’s loss “might be blamed as much on personal style as on the ravage of inflation” and highlighted in particular the president’s failure to seem confident and in control.⁶² *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, who could be both charitable and uncharitable in his opinion articles about Carter, wrote a piece two weeks before the 1980 election that harshly criticized Carter’s absence of vision and his failure to generate excitement about his presidency.⁶³ Joseph Kraft, a columnist for the *Washington Post*, also attacked Carter for his character traits, ending one column with a particularly biting assessment of Carter’s presidency: “At the center of the Carter legacy is an institution in trouble. A supreme office was trivialized to the point where it became thinkable for an actor to be elected president.”⁶⁴

By the time he left office, Carter was generally portrayed in the news media as a weak leader who spent four years stumbling from crisis to crisis, with neither a vision nor a decisive plan to resuscitate an ailing country. This perception does not completely capture the press coverage of Carter, though. In fact, in writing their valedictory editorials for the president, several newspaper editors and columnists defied the prevailing reportage and offered positive—sometimes even nostalgic—assessments of the

⁶¹ Memo, Jimmy Carter to Staff, 9/29/77, Jody Powell’s Files, “Memoranda: President Carter 9/6/77-12/27/77 [CF/OA 55],” Box 39, JCL.

⁶² Dallas Lee, “Carter’s Downfall Was Failure to Show His Inner Toughness,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 10 November 1980, 10A.

⁶³ Anthony Lewis, “Carter Against Himself,” *New York Times*, 16 October 1980, A31.

⁶⁴ Joseph Kraft, “Ramshackle Legacy...” *Washington Post*, 18 January 1981, C7.

Carter presidency. For example, the *New York Times* wrote that “Mr. Carter brought powerful personal values to office...they [his stances on human rights] were grounded in genuine morality and in a sense of duty to act against poverty and intolerance...Whatever the polls say, there’s no outguessing history. What is clear is that Jimmy Carter was a decent President.”⁶⁵ Anthony Lewis, the *Times* columnist, also struck a positive note in appraising the Carter presidency. In particular, Lewis noted the unrealistic expectations the American people have for their presidents, arguing that historians will view the Carter presidency more favorably in retrospect. Lewis also praised as a “great achievement” the fact that no American soldier died fighting during Carter’s term. “There were faults, deep ones. But Jimmy Carter is entitled to a moment of respect.”⁶⁶

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Georgia newspapers also assessed the Carter presidency in a more positive light. In an editorial endorsing Carter for president in 1980, Billy Blair wrote in the *Americus-Times Recorder* that the president has gained too little praise for his accomplishments and too much criticism for his failures. While Blair acknowledged that he feels a “loyalty to him because of who he is...a native son of Sumter County, Georgia,” he argued that Carter’s record alone should justify his reelection.⁶⁷ The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* also defended Carter’s record, asserting that he upheld sound Democratic values throughout his term and cannot be blamed for the party’s electoral shortcomings.⁶⁸

While Carter ended his term amid intense press criticism, it is imperative to recognize these dissenting voices in the news media. Indeed, there were several influential editorial

⁶⁵ “The President’s Report Card,” *New York Times*, 16 January 1981, A22.

⁶⁶ Anthony Lewis, “The King Must Die,” *New York Times*, 11 January 1981, E23.

⁶⁷ Billy Blair, “We Endorse Carter,” *Americus-Times Recorder*, 31 October 1980, 1-2.

⁶⁸ “Sore Losers,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 10 December 1980, 4A.

boards and columnists who were not willing to completely disparage Carter as a failed president. They touted his accomplishments—Camp David, in particular—and argued that much of the criticism in Washington was unjustified and, in some cases, petty. Nevertheless, when Carter’s term expired, the negative images prevailed in press retrospectives of his presidency.

* * *

While this chapter has been largely devoted to examining the press treatment of Carter, it is also important to understand how Carter and his administration viewed and subsequently managed relations with the press. Contrary to the general impression that the relationship was perpetually strained, internal administration memos show that Carter and his press staff were making a concerted effort to accommodate journalists and defuse any existing tension. Part of this effort was undoubtedly political: the intended effect was to flatter journalists, which would hopefully encourage them to write more positive stories. At the same time, though, the effort to work more cooperatively with the press seemed genuine. In one memo about press conferences with the White House Press Corps, Jody Powell gently informs Carter of his tendency to call on two correspondents from the same news network before calling on someone from another network—a breach of traditional press etiquette.⁶⁹ Powell then suggests that Carter try to democratize the conferences by choosing some reporters who do not get called on as often. Attached to the memo is a list of personal photographs of correspondents, which was intended to help Carter ensure he is calling on people from different networks. While it was certainly the

⁶⁹ Memo, Jody Powell to Jimmy Carter, 12/1/77, Jody Powell’s Files, “Memoranda: President Carter 9/6/77-12/27/77 [CF/OA 55],” Box 39, JCL.

product of a political calculation, this memo represents an honest effort to cultivate better relationships with some news correspondents at White House press conferences.

Other internal memos also reveal the administration's attempts to establish solid relationships with some editors and reporters from prominent publications. Indeed, the press office was always trying to improve Carter's image in the news media, and these efforts represented one method of doing just that. In one example, Deputy Press Secretary Ray Jenkins wrote letters to Southern newspapers in order to communicate the administration's accomplishments. He sent one of the letters to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, arguing that the president has not been ineffective, but that "his staff hasn't always done the best job in getting his accomplishments across."⁷⁰ This letter ostensibly symbolizes the press office's effort to defend the administration while also reaching out to certain news outlets in order to establish channels of communication.

The Carter administration also sought to cultivate relationships with particular writers who it deemed responsible and judicious in their political reporting. Despite the widespread impression that the administration disdained all reporters, there were in fact some writers whom Carter and his staff highly respected. Haynes Johnson of the *Washington Post* was a "very thoughtful and sensitive writer and person," and the *London Sunday Times*'s Henry Brandon was "probably the most well-respected foreign journalist in town."⁷¹ Of course, this praise can perhaps be partly attributed to the fact that these journalists often wrote favorably about Carter. (Included in the note about

⁷⁰ Letter, Ray Jenkins to Hal Gulliver, 11/15/79, Ray Jenkins's Files, "Outgoing Correspondence, 9/22/79-12/17/79," Box 4, JCL.

⁷¹ "Memo, Jody Powell to Jimmy Carter, 1/11/80, Jody Powell's Files, "Memoranda: President Carter 1/7/80-2/28/80," Box 39, JCL.

Johnson was “He likes you.”⁷²) Nevertheless, the comments dispel the notion that the relationship between the press and the Carter administration was solely characterized by acrimony.

When problems with the press did develop, however, it seemed that members of the administration were sometimes capable of viewing the situation in a humorous light. For example, at the White House Correspondents Dinner in 1978, Jody Powell delivered some closing remarks that sarcastically acknowledged the perpetual tension between the press and the presidency:

I know that you may sometimes feel that you are unfairly criticized. That all your hard work is unnoticed and too much attention is paid to occasional, inevitable and unintentional mistakes. Occasionally we in government may make libelous statements about your personal lives—your drinking habits or sexual preferences. We may feel compelled—now and then—to reluctantly spread a little gossip about your children. When we consider it appropriate we may refer to you as liars, drunks, clods and incompetents...[but] you are the only press we have—and those of us in the White House—really, honestly, truly, cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die—want you to succeed.⁷³

Scrawled at the top of these remarks was a handwritten note from Carter: “Jody – Great – I know you had them rolling in the aisles, or rolling their eyes – or whatever it is – J.”⁷⁴

Powell’s speech represented merely one example of the administration’s attempt to cast its relationship with the press in a comical way. Another example of this humor can be found in a memo from Carolyn Shields, Powell’s executive assistant, to members of the press office. Irritated that reporters always took her copy of the News Summary—the press staff’s compilation of the important news for the day—Shields joked that “there

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Remarks by Jody Powell, 4/29/78, Jody Powell’s Files, “Memoranda: President Carter 1/10/78-5/18/78 [CF/OA 160],” Box 39, JCL.

⁷⁴ Remarks by Jody Powell, 4/29/78, Jody Powell’s Files, “Memoranda: President Carter 1/10/78-5/18/78 [CF/OA 160],” Box 39, JCL.

have been many mornings when my News Summary simply was nowhere to be found because one of God's gifts to journalism decided they needed it worse than I did."⁷⁵

Despite all these instances of bonhomie—or, at least, cordial disagreement—between the Carter administration and the press, their relationship remained essentially fraught throughout Carter's four years in office. There was a fundamental distrust between the two that continually impaired their relations. Elizabeth Kurylo attributes this distrust to Carter's deficient understanding of how the press operates: "In general, he doesn't understand the media. He believes in a free press, but when it's applied to him, he's incredibly thin-skinned. He never figured out how to play the game. If you cross him, he's a different person. He'll remember every slight. It's almost as if he holds a grudge."⁷⁶

Whether or not Kurylo's statement is true, the tense relationship between Carter and the press is strikingly apparent in internal memos circulated among members of the administration. In particular, Carter and his staff seemed to exhibit an acute distaste for *Newsweek*, which they perpetually criticized for publishing inaccurate stories. As Powell acknowledged, "We have had difficulties from the start with the Newsweek Washington bureau. The principal problem is the bureau chief Mel Elfin. The White House correspondents, Tom DeFrank and Eleanor Clift, are responsible."⁷⁷ In a note to the mayor of Milwaukee, who initially wrote Carter to complain about *Newsweek*'s unfair coverage, the president responded with "Thanks! Newsweek is perhaps the worst violator

⁷⁵ Memo, Carolyn Shields to the News Summary Staff, 1/22/79, Jody Powell's Files, "Memoranda: Misc. Press Office Staff, 1/3/79-12/13/79 [CF/OA 5/9]," Box 45, JCL.

⁷⁶ Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/13/10.

⁷⁷ Memo, Jody Powell to Jimmy Carter, 5/8/80, Jody Powell's Files, "Memoranda: Jody Powell, 5/1/80-5/30/80 [CF/OA 750]," Box 38, JCL.

of the self-initiated story, quoting ‘sources’ which may or may not exist.”⁷⁸ These comments reflect an especially acute dislike of *Newsweek*. As if to concisely underscore this frustration, the word “No” is handwritten across an invitation from *Newsweek* inviting Carter to a “Convention Reception” on August 10, 1980.⁷⁹

While Carter’s relationship with *Newsweek* journalists was particularly fraught, there were plenty of other writers who became irritants to the administration. Hugh Sidey, a prominent journalist for *Time*, often wrote critically of Carter, which prompted Powell to conclude that Sidey “resents not being called in and stroked every couple of weeks.”⁸⁰ In a separate personal note, Powell argued that Sidey’s column about Camp David violated an agreement they had previously struck about reporting on the negotiations.⁸¹

Washington Post columnist Joseph Kraft also proved a persistent source of frustration for Carter. Writing to Ambassador Philip Alston, the president noted that “One of the most negative, biased and ill informed columnists in the nation is Joseph Kraft. He gets his material primarily from the Washington cocktail circuit.”⁸² Carter’s impression of Kraft as a Washington insider only heightened his irritation; Kraft represented precisely the type of Washington insularity that Carter so vehemently rejected.

The Carter administration also experienced a particularly problematic relationship with reporters and editors at the *Washington Post*. During Carter’s term, the *Post* had

⁷⁸ Letter, Jimmy Carter to Henry Maier, 11/3/77, Jody Powell’s Files, Memoranda: President Carter 9/6/77-12/27/77 [CF/OA 55],” Box 39, JCL.

⁷⁹ Letter, *Newsweek* Editors to Jimmy Carter, Undated, Press Jenkins, “Incoming Correspondence, 7/1/80-1/7/81,” Box 4, JCL.

⁸⁰ Memo, Jody Powell to Jimmy Carter, 1/11/80, Jody Powell’s Files, “Memoranda: President Carter 1/7/80-2/28/80,” Box 39, JCL.

⁸¹ Letter, Jody Powell to Hugh Sidey, 7/17/79, White House Central Files, “5/1/79-7/31/79,” Box PR80, JCL.

⁸² Letter, Jimmy Carter to Philip Alston, 3/8/78, White House Central Files, “1/20/77-1/20/80,” Box PR-9, JCL.

aggressively pursued several scandalous events—Hamilton Jordan allegedly using cocaine, objectifying the wife of the Egyptian ambassador, and spitting out his drink at a woman at the D.C. bar Sarsfield’s, for some examples—that ostensibly reflected the newspaper’s preoccupation with printing gossipy and salacious stories. Carter himself often questioned the editorial decisions of Benjamin Bradlee, the executive editor of the *Post*, who was ultimately accountable for all the stories printed about the Carter administration. While this relationship with the *Post* was certainly tense during Carter’s presidency, in some ways it culminated in an incident that occurred after Carter left office. This event can perhaps be viewed as the capstone of a frustrating four-year relationship between Carter and the press.

On October 5, 1981, the *Post* ran a gossip column suggesting that the Carters had installed listening devices in the Blair House, the official residence of visiting foreign dignitaries, in order to eavesdrop on the Reagans while they were in Washington for some pre-inaugural activities. The Carters were outraged, calling the report “false, defamatory and libelous.” They immediately threatened to sue the *Post* for libel and demanded that it retract the story and offer a public apology. Bradlee’s response only heightened the Carters’ anger: “How do you make a public apology—run up and down Pennsylvania Avenue bare bottom shouting, ‘I’m sorry’?”⁸³

The *Post* decided to print an editorial on October 14 that was purportedly an apology, but it contained ambiguous language that did not satisfy the Carters. The editorial, “F.Y.I.,” seemed to defend the *Post* by arguing that the article had reported the *existence* of a rumor, not the veracity of it. Instead of condemning the paper, the editors faulted

⁸³ Phil Gailey, “Carters Threaten to Sue for Libel,” *New York Times*, 8 October 1981, A25.

“those who read it casually” for not recognizing this important distinction.⁸⁴ Carter was perplexed by the apology, and in a telephone interview with the *New York Times*, he said “The editorial simply acknowledged that the story was false, that they knew it was false when they published it, but that they felt they had a right to publish reports they know to be untrue.”⁸⁵ Unsurprisingly, Carter also reiterated his intention to sue the *Post* over the story.

On October 23, the *Post* retracted the story and issued another apology, in the form of a front-page letter written by Donald E. Graham, the publisher of the newspaper. Graham wrote that the story was false and apologized for the embarrassment it caused the Carters.⁸⁶ A day later, Carter publicly announced his decision to drop the libel suit, though he censured the paper for waiting two and a half weeks until it retracted the story.⁸⁷

In a way, the Blair House ordeal represented the nadir of Carter’s relations with the news media. Upon leaving the presidency, Carter believed the press had been unfair in its criticism of him, but this criticism never reached the point where he felt compelled to actually sue a newspaper for libel. In the end, this incident only reinforced the image of Carter departing Washington as an embattled and unpopular president. He was now heading back to his peanut farm in Plains, Georgia, where he had begun his meteoric presidential rise only five years before. Given Carter’s beleaguered status, few in the press predicted the extent to which he would revive his reputation in the years to come.

⁸⁴ “F.Y.I.,” *Washington Post*, 14 October 1981, A24.

⁸⁵ Phil Gailey, “Carter Intent on Suing Washington Post on Rumor,” *New York Times*, 15 October 1981, B16.

⁸⁶ “Washington Post Apologizes to Carters for Printing Bugging Rumor,” *New York Times*, 23 October 1981, B7.

⁸⁷ Paul Taylor, “Carter Drops Plans for Suit Against Post,” *Washington Post*, 25 October 1981, A7.

Chapter Three: “Carter Redux”

*No other ex-president has been so active and involved in world affairs. Carter zips around like a global fireman, going to the spots of conflict, tropical diseases or elections that might be conducted unfairly.*¹

A day after Reagan’s inauguration, Carter made a brief trip to West Germany to meet the newly released Iranian hostages. Speaking about the crisis that had consumed the last years of his term—and possibly cost him reelection—Carter denounced the Iranian perpetrators and implored the men and women to take care of themselves in the upcoming months.² He then returned home to Plains, Georgia, feeling tired and depressed. After four years in the White House, Carter despaired of finding meaningful ways to occupy his time as a former president. In the span of a day, he went from being the leader of the free world to a tourist attraction in Plains. As Douglas Brinkley writes, “Mere days ago he had been the most powerful man in the world; now his immediate concern was whether the brick sidewalk he was laying in front of his home was crooked.”³

Worse yet, Carter discovered that his peanut warehouse, which he had put in a blind trust during his presidency, was mired in debt of more than \$1 million. Fortunately, both he and his wife, Rosalynn, had signed lucrative contracts to write their memoirs, which helped them begin to pay off the debt. While writing ultimately proved a cathartic way for Carter to express his frustration and despair after his defeat, he nevertheless spent the first few months of 1981 feeling ashamed and depressed: “But I returned to Plains completely exhausted, slept for almost twenty-four hours, and then awoke to an

¹ “Comeback for Carter,” *Washington Post*, 16 October 2002, 16.

² Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 41-2.

³ *Ibid.*, 44.

altogether new, unwanted, and potentially empty life...It was deeply discouraging for me to contemplate the unpredictable years ahead.”⁴

Carter’s post-presidential career began in January 1982, when he experienced the epiphany that led to the creation of the Carter Center. In a story that has been endlessly repeated both in the news media and by the Carters themselves, Rosalynn describes waking up in the middle of the night to find Carter sitting upright in bed. She asked if anything was wrong, and Carter elucidated his vision for what would become the Carter Center: “I know what we can do at the library. We can develop a place to help people who want to resolve disputes. There is no place like that now... We could get good mediators that both sides would trust, and they could meet with no publicity, no fanfare, perhaps at times in total secrecy.”⁵

Opened in 1986, the Carter Center has been the primary vehicle through which Carter has pursued his post-presidential activities. With an array of experts working in many different fields of study, from Latin American policy to international disease eradication and domestic poverty, the Carter Center operates as a think tank and conflict resolution center. The organization is associated with Emory University in Atlanta, and is a private, nongovernmental, and nonprofit body (This is separate from the Jimmy Carter Library and Museum, which is owned and run by U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.)⁶ The prodigious policy experience at the Carter Center, coupled with

⁴ Jimmy Carter. *Everything to Gain: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life*, (Little Rock, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶ Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 80.

who was running it, has led some in the news media and government to joke that the organization was a “shadow government”⁷ or “mini-White House.”⁸

Years later, in his article about Carter’s post-presidency in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Wayne King characterized the Carter Center as a “sort of vest-pocket World Health Organization, miniature United Nations and ad hoc Department of Health and Human Services.”⁹ Indeed, through programs like the International Negotiation Network, which sought to resolve foreign civil wars, and Global 2000 Inc., an organization designed to improve agricultural yields and eradicate diseases like Guinea worm in emergent countries, the Carter Center started to garner global attention for its dedication to resolving foreign disputes and aiding those stricken with disease.

Several factors contributed to Carter’s reemergence as a global humanitarian activist. For one, he left office in good health at the relatively young age of 56. This gave him the energy and time to pursue the human rights issues that had always mattered to him. Indeed, Carter’s post-presidential activism has represented much more than a desire to rehabilitate his image. As he has repeatedly emphasized, his commitment to social justice stems from his childhood growing up in rural Georgia, where witnessing bitter racial tensions instilled in him a desire to work for equality. In this way, human rights issues have always played a pivotal role in Carter’s life—a role only reinforced by his fervent Christianity—and thus his decision to devote his post-presidency to performing charitable works seems a logical manifestation of his personal interests.

⁷ Ibid., 136.

⁸ Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/13/10.

⁹ Wayne King, “Carter Redux,” *New York Times*, 10 December 1989, SM38.

What is more, many of Carter's post-presidential humanitarian endeavors have involved foreign affairs, which was one of his biggest strengths as president. As a result, Carter had an opportunity to continue some of the negotiation and conflict-resolution efforts—especially the Camp David Accords and a broader Middle East peace—that served as important components of his term in office.¹⁰ In this respect, it was natural for him to make resolving foreign crises a focus of his post-presidency. As a former president, Carter is also unfettered by the bureaucratic and structural impediments that often prevent presidents from taking spontaneous action. He no longer has to deal with the press on a daily basis, for example, nor is he compelled to confer with members of his cabinet before making decisions. As Barry Jagoda argues, Carter's ability to dictate his own agenda has been a major factor in his post-presidential success: "He was doing it all by himself. That was key. He didn't have to drag his administration, the press, and a confused public along with him. He was a lone ranger."¹¹

Perhaps the most important factor allowing for Carter's reemergence as a humanitarian activist was that he left office with his reputation largely intact. Unlike Nixon, he did not carry the burden of shame. Indeed, while Nixon was forced to resign amid scandal, Carter had merely lost an election, which, while certainly embarrassing, did not necessarily deprive him of potentially winning back the public's favor. Without Nixon's disgrace, Carter was able to leverage his prestige in order to remain a highly visible former president. As a result, only a few years after leaving office, it was possible for him to regain prominence among the press and the American public alike.

¹⁰ Rod Troester. *Jimmy Carter As Peacemaker*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), 26.

¹¹ Phone interview with Barry Jagoda, 2/15/10.

Beginning in the 1980s, Carter used his policy institute to host symposia on subjects as diverse as the Middle East peace process, arms control with the Soviets, global health policy, and the economic condition of Latin American countries. In November 1983, Carter held one symposium, “Five Years After Camp David,” that brought a multitude of prominent diplomats, statesmen, and academics from around the world to Atlanta for a four-day conference on the current state of affairs in the Middle East. Chaired by Carter and Gerald Ford, the event established the Camp David Accords as a framework for continuing discussion among the various parties involved. As Brinkley writes, in hosting this event, “Carter had proven that his conflict resolution center could indeed fill a significant vacuum.”¹² The conference seemed to reflect Carter’s profound ambitions for his post-presidency. He had major goals on his agenda, and he was willing to work tirelessly to achieve them.

Carter also started working with Habitat for Humanity in the mid-1980s, an experience he called one of the “most inspiring” since leaving the White House.¹³ In 1986, Habitat started the first Jimmy Carter Work Project, intended as an annual program to build a house in a new domestic or international city each year. Whenever the organization experienced problems in carrying out its mission to build homes, Carter became its ultimate resource, using his clout as a former president to secure access to countries wary of Habitat’s presence.¹⁴ For this charity work, Carter received some positive press coverage, with the *New York Times* writing that “Mr. Carter has been

¹² Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 120.

¹³ Jimmy Carter. *Everything to Gain: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life*, (Little Rock, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), 94.

¹⁴ Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 254-55.

toiling in a callus-raising enterprise that may be unheard of for a former Commander in Chief.”¹⁵

In 1986, Carter extended his benevolent works by creating the Council of Freely Elected Heads of Government, an organization dedicated to promoting free and fair elections and stressing human rights issues in Latin American countries. Along with these activities, Carter was teaching at Emory University, implementing new Carter Center programs, and visiting foreign countries. Some of his high-profile trips included two unofficial diplomatic forays to the Middle East (1983 and 1987), a ten-day visit to Peru, Brazil, Argentina and Panama (1984), and another trip to Central America (1986), where he lobbied for democracy in Nicaragua.

Carter also consistently published books throughout the 1980s, an activity that has played a crucial role in shaping his image and drawing public attention to his work. Indeed, from 1982 to 1988, he published five books, including *Keeping Faith*; *Negotiation: The Alternative to Hostility*; *The Blood of Abraham*; *Everything to Gain*; and *An Outdoor Journal*. While these books typically received mixed reviews in the press, they nevertheless represent the centrality of writing in Carter’s post-presidency. He has used publishing as a means to burnish his reputation and ensure his continuing relevance to the American public. In this way, writing has proved a notable component of Carter’s reemergence as an elder statesman and global humanitarian.

Throughout his diplomatic excursions in the 1980s, Carter elicited both positive and negative attention. During his 1983 trip to the Middle East, for example, Carter drew fire from Arabs in the West Bank and East Jerusalem for the Camp David Accords, which the

¹⁵ Phil Gailey and William Farrell, “Down Home With Carter,” *New York Times*, 28 March 1984, B10.

protesters rejected as legitimizing the Israeli occupation.¹⁶ On the other hand, in 1984 Carter was favorably received during a trip to Argentina, whose people expressed their gratitude for his strong leadership in denouncing the ruling junta during his presidency. The *Washington Post* joined in the chorus of praise for Carter, editorializing that he “richly deserved every accolade he received on his visit to Argentina the other day.” The *Post* went so far as to counter critics who had labeled Carter as “preachy”: “Mr. Carter was strong and loud and pushy and preachy in Argentina...They were wrong and he was right.”¹⁷ Regardless of the tone of the news coverage, though, one thing was clear: three years after his presidency, Carter was back in the public spotlight in important ways.

While Carter received some notable press coverage in the early- and mid-1980s for his nascent post-presidential humanitarianism, his reemergence as a consistent subject of mainstream news was marked by his intervention in the 1989 election in Panama. Starting with his involvement in this election, Carter’s determined—and sometimes ostentatious—efforts to resolve international disputes would make him a fixture in the eyes of the press, the public, and government officials. As Elizabeth Kurylo notes, “Panama in 1989 put him back on the map.”¹⁸

* * *

Carter arrived in Panama in the spring of 1989 with a delegation of officials to monitor the country’s presidential elections, which were slated for May 7. According to Brinkley, Carter wanted to facilitate the institution of a democratic system of government to replace the military rule of Manuel Noriega, the Panamanian president. Accompanied

¹⁶ David K. Shipler, “West Bank Arabs Protest Carter’s Visit,” *New York Times*, 10 March 1983, A1.

¹⁷ “For Mr. Carter, Honor Deserved,” *Washington Post*, 13 October 1984, A16.

¹⁸ Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/13/10.

by a team of election observers, therefore, Carter's primary objective was to prevent Noriega from rigging the election in favor of his chosen candidate.¹⁹

After the votes were tallied, the preliminary results suggested that Noriega's candidate suffered an unequivocal defeat.²⁰ Before the results could be verified, however, Noriega deployed his troops to various polling stations in order to halt the vote-counting process; they stole the tally sheets and effectively prevented the opposition leader from claiming victory.²¹ After several fruitless attempts to negotiate with Noriega, Carter publicly denounced the results, asserting that Noriega was "taking the elections by fraud."²² Coming from a former president, Carter's proclamation resonated in other countries. In short, given his status as a former president, many foreign governments respected his opinion on the matter and trusted his judgment. As a news article in the *Washington Post* put it, "His comments helped to galvanize international condemnation of Noriega's regime, denying him the legitimacy he sought and apparently shocking his followers."²³

After protesting the election results, Carter immediately garnered widespread international acclaim for taking a bold stand against what appeared to be Noriega's massive corruption. Many national news outlets were laudatory of Carter's actions in Panama, commenting that the former president had exhibited fierce leadership in publicly accusing Noriega of fraud. For example, Richard Cohen noted approvingly in the *Washington Post* that Carter had "screeched his indignation that the election had been

¹⁹ Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 275-6.

²⁰ The Carter Center, "Observing the 1989 Panama Elections," 1 July 1989, 57.

²¹ Lindsey Gruson, "Soldiers Seize Tallies and Block Counting of Vote in Panama," *New York Times*, 8 May 1989, A1.

²² William Branigin, "As Observer, Carter Proves Acute," *Washington Post*, 9 May 1989, A23.

²³ *Ibid.*

stolen.”²⁴ This praise was the similar to the *Post*’s remark about Carter’s trip to Argentina in 1984: in both cases, the newspaper applauded him for having taken a stand to stop what he perceived to be gross injustice. As time went on, many other publications would adopt this form of praise to describe Carter and his post-presidential activities.

With Carter’s efforts in Panama, the press began to recognize his impressive achievements since leaving the White House. Some writers even situated Carter’s work in Panama in a larger framework of his post-presidential humanitarian activities, which they contrasted with his presidency. An apt example is Cohen’s aforementioned column in the *Post*, in which he commended Carter’s post-presidency and argued that his recent accomplishments may eclipse those of his presidency: “If scholars get around to evaluating presidential retirements, Carter’s will rank at the top. His was hardly a distinguished presidency, but it was redeemed by a retirement that...shines for the price put on it.”²⁵

After Carter’s monitoring of the Panamanian elections, articles like Cohen’s became increasingly frequent in major newspapers and magazines. Journalists were beginning to understand the intensity of Carter’s commitment to human rights, and they consequently changed the way they wrote about him. He was no longer merely a failed president, but an ardent humanitarian activist. Starting with Panama in May 1989, it was unusual for any sizeable article about Carter to omit mention of his post-presidential accomplishments.

In this way, Carter’s involvement in Panama prompted a wave of positive news coverage throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s that reflected a growing awareness of

²⁴ Richard Cohen, “The Carter Distinction,” *Washington Post*, 11 May 1989, A21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

his humanitarian efforts. Following the election in Panama, Peter Applebome wrote a news story in the *New York Times* significantly titled, “Unofficially, Era of Carter Is Still Here.” In the article, Applebome noted the initial surprise of many people who learned that Carter was helping the Bush administration with the elections: “He is in some ways the last person one might expect to be sitting at the right arm of a Republican President and reporting on world affairs.”²⁶ But then Applebome acknowledged Carter’s “rising reputation” and situated his involvement in Panama within the context of his broader post-presidential endeavors, writing that “[his election monitoring] was only the most dramatic sign of his ambitious efforts to continue to play a major role in foreign affairs.”²⁷

A week and a half after Applebome’s article ran in the *New York Times*, Eleanor Clift and George Hackett, who had been particularly critical of Carter during his presidency, wrote an article in *Newsweek* titled “How to Be an Ex-President.” In the story, they explicitly contrasted Carter’s presidency with his post-presidency: “Carter’s ex-presidency has arguably been more successful than his hapless single term in the Oval Office. Since leaving government in 1981, the Georgia Democrat has become increasingly involved in foreign-affairs and human-rights issues.”²⁸ The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published several pieces to the same effect. In one column, Tom Teepen contrasted Carter’s activities with those of Ford and Reagan: “Our other former

²⁶ Peter Applebome, “Unofficially, Era of Carter Is Still Here,” *New York Times*, 11 May 1989, A9.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Eleanor Clift and George Hackett, “How to Be an Ex-President,” *Newsweek*, 22 May 1989, 40.

presidents retired, which is certainly their right; they earned it. Mr. Carter went to work and, if you haven't noticed, he's doing a helluva job.”²⁹

On November 5, 1989, both the *New York Times* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published articles discussing Carter's increasingly positive image in the media, in academia, and among the American public. Writing in the *Times*, Terence Smith, the former White House correspondent, argued that Carter's successful post-presidency may convince some to reevaluate his reputation as a failed president and concede that, in the end, his term in office included notable accomplishments, like the Camp David Accords and Panama Canal treaty.³⁰ For its part, the *Journal* reported that many presidential scholars were starting to revise their conceptions of Carter as an inept president. These articles represented a significant development in the evolution of his public image: less than a decade after Carter left office, many journalists and academics were already starting to reevaluate his presidency. Carter's impressive humanitarian activities were inducing people to revisit the prevailing negative assessments of his term in office. He was no longer simply recognized as a successful diplomat, but as a decent president as well—a startling transformation given his unpopularity upon leaving office.

One article, in particular, seems to crystallize the prevailing reassessments of Carter's value as an outspoken advocate for human rights. Titled “Carter Redux,” the article, written by Wayne King, ran as a feature story in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* on December 10, 1989. King, who served as the head of the paper's Atlanta bureau during the Carter administration, provided a glowing portrait of the ex-president, praising him as the “perfect man for the diplomat-without-portfolio post,” a person who, after a

²⁹ Tom Teepen, “In Ranks of Living Ex-Presidents, Carter Is in a Class By Himself,” *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, 20 August 1989, D7.

³⁰ Terence Smith, “The Reversals of History,” *New York Times*, 5 November 1989, E23.

period of exile in the “political wilderness,” has returned to the forefront of American diplomacy. King also attested to the exceptional nature of Carter’s post-presidency, writing that “Today, Jimmy Carter, as a court of last resort, is the first President since Herbert Hoover to play so active a role in world affairs after leaving the White House.”³¹

Perhaps most insightful, King provided an explanation for why Carter might prove a more successful ex-president than president. He argued that some of Carter’s character traits that alienated Americans during his presidency—his self-righteousness and stubbornness, in particular—were actually beneficial in the context of his humanitarian activities. For example, Carter’s headstrong determination and his uncompromising views played an integral role in helping him strike accords with some of the world’s dictators. In addition, King included in the article a choice comment from Carter about his own rehabilitation as seen by the media. Carter argues that he has not changed, but that the press has decided to revise its perceptions of him in light of his post-presidential accomplishments.³²

Despite his concession that Carter often vexed sitting presidents with his moral causes, King remained staunchly positive in tone throughout the article: Carter is back in the spotlight and fiercely committed to doing good works. This article perhaps represents the culmination of positive news stories after Carter’s involvement in the 1989 Panama elections. Not even a decade after leaving office, Carter had resurfaced as a humanitarian activist, and King’s piece, appearing as it did in the most prestigious newspaper, testifies to the former president’s increasingly positive representation in the news media.

* * *

³¹ Wayne King, “Carter Redux,” *New York Times Magazine*, 10 December 1989, SM 38.

³² *Ibid.*

Shortly after his successful work in Panama, Carter seized another opportunity to promote democracy in Latin America. Nicaragua had scheduled national elections for February 25, 1990, and after noticing Carter's work in Panama, several parties involved in the election had invited the Carter Center to serve as international observers.³³ Although some in the Bush administration accused Carter of favoring incumbent Daniel Ortega's Sandinista government during the campaign, Carter unequivocally supported the election results: Ortega lost the election to Violeta Barrios de Chamorro of the United Nicaraguan Opposition, and Carter immediately implored Ortega to peacefully relinquish power. After a candid discussion with Carter, who commiserated with the Sandinista leader about the experience of losing a national election, Ortega reluctantly accepted the results.³⁴

Carter's election work in Nicaragua, and especially his personal mediation efforts with Ortega, prompted another outpouring of positive news coverage for the former president. For example, in a news story in the *Washington Post*, Lee Hockstader wrote that "By all accounts, Carter got it right on Sunday in Nicaragua...Carter was instrumental in mediating between Daniel Ortega...and Violeta Chamorro."³⁵ In addition, *U.S. News and World Report* commended Carter for his work, writing that the former president "played a crucial role in paving the way for the Sandinistas to hand over power to Violeta Chamorro."³⁶

Like many of the news stories after the Panama elections, these articles about Nicaragua often invoked Carter's efforts in election monitoring as an entry point to a

³³ Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 297.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 306-7.

³⁵ Lee Hockstader, "Carter Played Pivotal Role in Hours After Polls Closed," *Washington Post*, 27 February 1990, A19.

³⁶ "Jimmy Carter's Second Chance," *U.S. News and World Report*, 12 March 1990, 35.

larger discussion about his post-presidential activities. One particularly significant article, published a few days before the Nicaraguan elections, juxtaposed the image of President Carter with that of the post-presidential humanitarian activist, arguing that Carter has pursued a conscious campaign to rehabilitate his reputation. After departing the White House “a victim of history, with hostages in Iran and double-digit inflation,” Carter “has become a moral presence, running harder than ever to recast his legacy with good deeds and making an impact in a way historians say few ex-presidents have even tried.”³⁷

The Southern newspapers also combined praise of Carter’s achievements in Nicaragua with acclaim for his post-presidency as a whole. Writing in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, columnist Cynthia Tucker noted that “some of his diplomatic efforts since leaving office have been even more impressive [than those during his presidency]. And, if democracy takes hold in Nicaragua, Mr. Carter’s success there will have been nothing short of awesome.” Tucker concluded her column with a poignant remark: “I am still very proud of the man from Plains.”³⁸ For another example, in a news story published in November 1990, Elizabeth Kurylo of the *Journal* observed that “Mr. Carter is quietly, deliberately redefining the ex-presidency. Those who once laughed at his failures as president...say he might someday win the Nobel Peace Prize.”³⁹

Such positive assessments of Carter were becoming increasingly prevalent during the early 1990s. Newspapers and magazines were beginning to understand the scope and influence of his activities, and many reporters therefore reevaluated the way they

³⁷ Art Harris, “Citizen Carter,” *Washington Post*, 22 February 1990, B1.

³⁸ Cynthia Tucker, “In Office and Out, Carter’s Achievements Have Enhanced His Stature,” *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, 3 March 1990, A17.

³⁹ Elizabeth Kurylo, “Jimmy Carter in His Second Term – Peacemaker is Redefining the Ex-Presidency,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 11 November 1980, A1.

perceived the former president. Indeed, the positive coverage of Carter's involvement in the 1989 Panama elections had initiated a sustained period during which journalists began to write about him in an entirely different way. Formerly a failed president, he was becoming an internationally renowned elder statesman and human rights guarantor.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Carter's diplomatic activities became even more pronounced, both for the way he worked with—and occasionally eclipsed—the Clinton administration and for the intensive media coverage his trips generated. Indeed, Carter was a particularly vexing problem for Clinton, who often found his foreign policy agenda complicated by Carter's bold pronouncements about international conflicts he had been asked to mediate.

Perhaps emboldened by the positive press coverage of his diplomatic activities, Carter was clearly becoming more ambitious in his post-presidential pursuits. In 1994 alone, he was involved in negotiating an end to crises in North Korea, Haiti, and Bosnia. This diplomacy only increased the news media fixation on Carter's post-presidency. In a way, this fixation was part of a circular logic that began to govern Carter's relationship with the media in the mid-1990s: encouraged by positive press coverage, Carter continued to pursue major diplomatic initiatives, which in turn gave him more (largely) positive media attention. Therefore, with no electoral responsibilities and a robust global policy institute supporting his efforts, Carter was back in the national spotlight in a way virtually unprecedented for former presidents.

In June 1994, Carter traveled to North Korea to meet privately with Kim Il Sung, the country's Communist dictator. Although he was traveling as a private citizen, Carter had been granted approval by the Clinton administration, which hoped the former president's

past mediation efforts would prove effective in defusing the crisis with North Korea over nuclear weapons. Clinton was particularly concerned about the country's production of plutonium at a Yongbyon facility, a development that would potentially indicate the presence of an atomic weapon.⁴⁰ After Kim expelled nuclear inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in early 1993, Clinton realized the grave menace of a nuclear North Korea to both South Korea and the United States. As a result, the IAEA and the U.N. Security Council, along with the Clinton administration, began considering implementing sanctions against North Korea. Before enacting these punitive measures, though, Clinton was willing to dispatch Carter to explore the possibility of a diplomatic compromise, which, if successful, would obviate the need for sanctions by providing assurance that North Korea was not processing plutonium.

Shortly after meeting with Kim, Carter received an agreement that North Korea would freeze its nuclear activities and permit two IAEA inspectors to continue monitoring the Yongbyon facility. It was a diplomatic success, but Carter complicated the situation by suddenly appearing live on CNN to proclaim this breakthrough and reject the use of sanctions. Carter had failed to consult Clinton before making this announcement, a breach of protocol that "infuriated" the administration's national security team.⁴¹ What was worse, Carter's interview left Clinton practically unable to deviate from the policy that Carter had unilaterally outlined. As a result, the administration was put in the discomfiting position of having to explain that Carter did not accurately express its views on the situation. For example, the *Washington Post* reported that "In an embarrassing split, administration officials said they could not explain why Carter said in North Korea

⁴⁰ Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 394.

⁴¹ Marion V. Creekmore Jr. *A Moment of Crisis* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2006), 183.

the United States had dropped its recent proposal for sanctions against the country, a day after President Clinton had said the diplomatic drive for sanctions would continue.”⁴²

Carter’s renewed confidence in his diplomatic skills—as exemplified by the interview—seriously compromised the Clinton administration’s position.

With his statement on CNN, Carter demonstrated a remarkable savvy in exploiting the media to serve his own ends. Typically cast as someone who would prefer not to interact with the press, in this instance Carter was seizing an opportunity to broadcast his message—and, on a more basic level, to broadcast himself as an esteemed diplomat—to viewers around the world. His appearance on CNN did indeed anger many Clinton officials and some members of the press, but this reaction may be an indicator of Carter’s success in publicizing himself as an elder statesman. If he sought to raise his national profile during the North Korea nuclear crisis, he achieved his objective. And ironically, he used the news media, his former adversary, to do it.

In general, the press praised Carter for his diplomatic success in North Korea but also questioned whether he overstepped his mandate. Many reporters conceded, however, that this level of involvement in foreign affairs for a former president was stunning. Writing in the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, a local Georgia newspaper, Jennifer Lin’s reporting highlighted some of the trip’s more negative aspects: “But the standoff isn’t over yet and ending it permanently may be tough because of confusion created by former President Jimmy Carter...the White House must now contend with damage control from the Carter trip. Several times Carter has contradicted White House policy and undermined

⁴² R. Jeffrey Smith and Bradley Graham, “White House Disputes Carter on North Korea,” *Washington Post*, 18 June 1994, A1.

Clinton...[leaving him] in an awkward position.”⁴³ In an editorial, the *Washington Post* acknowledged that Carter may have “complicated” Clinton’s situation, but it commended the trip as “astonishing”: “He went in on his status as a former American president but conducted himself as an above-the-fray mediator trying to keep two heedless parties from going over the brink to war.”⁴⁴ In addition, the *New York Times* published two editorials about Carter’s trip to North Korea, both of which stressed the former president’s achievements in creating an opportunity for dialogue between the two countries.⁴⁵⁴⁶

Of course, there were also some articles and columns during the North Korea crisis that were almost uniformly negative. One of the most common forms of criticism was the accusation that Carter was placating the dictator Kim Il Sung, naively accepting his assurances of a nuclear freeze at face value and consequently jettisoning Clinton’s diplomatic threat of sanctions. Most prominent among these critics was the *Times* columnist William Safire, who wrote a column lamenting the “creation of Jimmy Clinton, with the return of the malaise of leaderlessness.” Safire wrote that in trusting the “last Stalinist,” Carter “again bets on the contagion of his own indisputable goodness... With no basis for trust, we’re trusting North Korea with precious time.”⁴⁷ Safire was deploying a critique that has often been launched at Carter throughout his public life; namely, that his self-righteous and stubborn moralizing could blind him to the duplicitous and cruel nature of some foreign leaders.

⁴³ Jennifer Lin, “Carter May Have Created Escape Hatch,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 20 June 1994, A1.

⁴⁴ “Mr. Carter’s Trip,” *Washington Post*, 20 June 1994, A14.

⁴⁵ “The Carter Opening,” *New York Times*, 21 June 1994, A16.

⁴⁶ “Finally, Talks With North Korea,” *New York Times*, 25 June 1994, A22.

⁴⁷ William Safire, “Jimmy Clinton,” *New York Times*, 27 June 1994, A17.

Similarly, Russell Watson, writing in *Newsweek*, employed a skeptical tone in evaluating Carter's work in North Korea. With the title "A Stooge or a Savior," the article commences with a juxtaposition of the two leaders:

The body language said it all. There was earnest Jimmy Carter, smiling beatifically as he extolled the efficacy of 'good will' and the prospects for 'full friendship and understanding' between the United States and North Korea. And there was Kim Il Sung, a Stalinist dictator of nearly 50 years' standing, lapping up Carter's offering like a well-fed but malevolent bullfrog.⁴⁸

While Carter's involvement in North Korea certainly provoked its share of praise and criticism in the news media, the enduring significance of the press coverage of this trip is not necessarily the type of coverage but the volume of it. Throughout the North Korea crisis, a former president occasionally seemed to be making headlines as often as the sitting president. Carter was a persistent subject in newspapers and magazines, an intriguing development examined by Elaine Sciolino of the *New York Times*. She argued how, unlike Carter's other post-presidential endeavors, his trip to North Korea marked his reemergence as a political figure involved in debates about American foreign policy. She noted that while Carter's election-monitoring and disease-eradication efforts have raised his national profile, "it took an unusual visit to North Korea last week to thrust him back onto the front pages and into a foreign policy maelstrom that has had officials and commentators arguing for a week whether he was making peace or just making trouble."⁴⁹

In this way, Carter's involvement in the North Korea crisis signaled his return to prominence in the press and in government circles. He was once again a regular subject

⁴⁸ Russell Watson, "A Stooge or a Savior?" *Newsweek*, 27 June 1994, 38.

⁴⁹ Elaine Sciolino, "For Carter, a Thrust Onto the Front Pages Again," *New York Times*, 23 June 1994, A6.

in national and international news, attracting press coverage more typical of a president than a former president. As Elizabeth Kurylo of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* argued, “Carter’s performance in North Korea is what has raised his profile to the highest point since he left the White House.”⁵⁰ Kurylo also maintains that “North Korea was huge. It got a lot of the pundits in DC talking about whether it was appropriate for Carter to be doing U.S. diplomacy when he wasn’t president...It reached fever pitch...[people were wondering] whether Carter had taken it too far.”⁵¹

While the press was not uniform in praising or criticizing him, it seemed that most reporters agreed that after his involvement in North Korea, Carter was once again a fixture of national attention, a determined former president whose actions occasionally merited front-page coverage in the country’s major newspapers.

* * *

Four months after his work in North Korea, Carter pursued another ambitious diplomatic initiative in trying to resolve the struggle for presidential power in Haiti. After having astonished the American public with his involvement in North Korea, Carter was back at it again, mediating another major international dispute and thereby helping to solidify his reputation as a global humanitarian activist. His work in North Korea had seemed surprising for a former president; with Haiti, Carter was beginning to make it look like resolving international crises was one of his customary activities as a former president. And as much as Clinton hated to cede the spotlight, his willingness to let Carter assist him indicates that he clearly recognized the former president’s virtues as a mediator.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Kurylo, “Carter Holds Respect, But Still No Nobel,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 11 September 1994, A1.

⁵¹ Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/13/10.

In December 1990, Jean-Bertrand Aristide became the first democratically elected president in Haiti's history. Less than a year later, however, the Haitian military staged a coup and ousted Aristide, who fled for his life and eventually settled in America. The military coup, led by Lieutenant General Raoul Cedras, produced a refugee crisis, with many Haitians trying to flee the island in fear of the military's rule. These refugees posed a serious problem for the United States. Both the Bush and Clinton administrations grappled with whether to send the refugees back to Haiti or adopt a process by which the immigrants could legally reside in the United States. When Clinton's plans for the refugees failed, he once again sought Carter's help. Carter had established a relationship with Aristide during his exile, and the former president thought reinstating Aristide was the only way to resolve the refugee problem.⁵²

After much deliberation, the Clinton administration decided in late August 1994 that it would give Cedras three weeks to relinquish his post. If he failed to acquiesce, the United States would invade Haiti on September 19. In the interim period, however, Carter prevailed on Clinton to let him travel to Haiti with a small delegation, which had the express purpose of negotiating an end to Cedras's rule and arranging the reinstallation of Aristide as president. Carter and his team of diplomats persuaded both Cedras and the acting Haitian president, Emile Jonassaint, that trying to resist a U.S. military intervention would be futile. Eventually, both Haitian leaders, under threat of invasion, agreed to cede power to Aristide. It was just in time. U.S. forces had already started making their way toward Haiti.

⁵² Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 415.

Carter's mission to Haiti elicited acclaim from many different news media outlets. This post-presidential endeavor, coming as it did only four months after his work in North Korea, seemed to solidify Carter's reputation as someone the press needed to cover. After the Haiti mission, he appeared on the front of both *Time* and *Newsweek*, the first time he had graced the cover of either since the end of his presidency. This, if anything, should indicate Carter's renewed relevance to the press: once again, he was involved in a sitting administration's foreign policy in a manner virtually unparalleled in the modern era, and the press deemed it necessary to document the intriguing continuation of Carter's efforts. Elizabeth Kurylo noted that "Jimmy Carter's Haiti initiative is the second high-profile attempt by the former president in a matter of months to avert a military showdown between the United States and its enemies."⁵³ Kurylo also raised a tantalizing issue that had persistently surfaced during Carter's post-presidency: speculation that he might be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* extolled the former president both for his specific work in Haiti and for his other diplomatic and humanitarian efforts,⁵⁴ though the *Post* did so more guardedly than the *Times*. The paper acknowledged that "Jimmy Carter has carved out an unprecedented and unorthodox role in American diplomacy...he has delivered what the administration failed to achieve on its own."⁵⁵ But the *Post* took issue with Carter's "tendency to play up tyrants and to demean his own government," a criticism that has dogged Carter throughout his post-presidency.

⁵³ Elizabeth Kurylo, "A Diplomatic Breakthrough? Carter's Role Caps Strained Relationship With Clinton," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 17 September 1994, A12.

⁵⁴ "Jimmy Carter's Contribution," *New York Times*, 18 September 1994, A15.

⁵⁵ "Jimmy Carter's Intervention," *Washington Post*, 2 October 1994, C6.

Two news articles in the *New York Times* used Carter's work in Haiti to reflect on his growing influence as a former president. In one story, Elaine Sciolino noted that "Mr. Carter has now succeeded in doing what no former President in the 20th century has done: shaping the policies of a predecessor," though she also acknowledged that he can sometimes be an obstinate diplomat, refusing to abide by the sitting administration's specific guidelines.⁵⁶ In another article, Maureen Dowd (who was then a reporter) argued that Carter was "no longer a shrinking figure on the world stage... In a relationship that seems unprecedented, Mr. Carter has turned the Carter Center in Atlanta into a sort of State Department South, and he has turned himself into a Secretary of State for the dispossessed, dealing with the leaders no one else wants to deal with, talking out problems everyone else has given up on."⁵⁷

During the aftermath of Haiti, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* published an article to commemorate Carter's 70th birthday, using this event as an opportunity to look back on Carter's post-presidency. In the article, Elizabeth Kurylo wrote that, in the thirteen years since leaving office at age 56, "Carter's global exploits in the pursuit of peace, democracy, and human rights have won him international acclaim... Even the press is interested again. In the days immediately after his Haitian trip, the Carter Center press office was getting 200 requests a day for interviews." Kurylo continued to assert that compared to other former presidents, "Carter shines... he has carved himself a unique role as a diplomat without portfolio who answers only to himself."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Elaine Sciolino, "Diplomatic Subcontracting's Fine If You Get Good Help," *New York Times*, 25 September 1994, A6.

⁵⁷ Maureen Dowd, "Guess Who's Coming to Diplomacy," *New York Times*, 25 September 1994, E1.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Kurylo, "Jimmy Carter at 70," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 25 September 1994, A8.

While Carter earned many plaudits from the press for his Haiti trip, not all of the coverage of him was positive. In a *Time* piece entitled “Road to Haiti,” Bruce Nelan criticized Clinton for ceding his diplomatic authority to a “failed former president.” He also condemned Carter’s agreement with the Haitian leaders, writing that “It treated men denounced as thugs as ‘honorable’ officials worthy of ‘mutual respect.’”⁵⁹ In another *Time* article, Michael Kramer also disparaged Clinton for soliciting Carter’s help: “Why would a President whose closest aides think the country is fast concluding he isn’t up to the job voluntarily associate himself with a predecessor about whom that judgment is widely taken a fact?”⁶⁰ Kramer also invoked the popular criticism of Carter that surfaces in Lance Morrow’s article from the same issue of *Time*: Carter’s willingness to appease dictators. In his article, Morrow sarcastically suggested that “Cedras, a notably bloody and ruthless man on a bloody, miserable island, should go and teach Carter’s Sunday school class sometime. Carter, citizen of the world, seems to have missed class the day we learned that even a character like Hitler can turn on the charm.”⁶¹

Newsweek also published an article about Carter’s trip to Haiti that proved generally negative in tone. While recognizing Carter’s active post-presidency—and conceding that his work in Haiti saved many lives—Eleanor Clift wrote that “Carter looked naïve and even gushy in his characterizations of the Haitian leaders – men whom Clinton had described as murderers, rapists and torturers.” Clift also asserted that “He is preachy and subtly vain – nearly obsessive in the pursuit of what he sees as the one true path in

⁵⁹ Bruce W. Nelan, “Road to Haiti,” *Time*, 3 October 1994.

⁶⁰ Michael Kramer, “The Carter Connection,” *Time*, 3 October 1994.

⁶¹ Lance Morrow, “Evil Is Not Impressed for Very Long,” *Time*, 3 October 1994.

international politics, and plainly concerned for his place in history.”⁶² At the same time, she acknowledged that it is “impossible to dismiss him.”

On December 17, 1994, Carter traveled to Bosnia for what would become his third major diplomatic initiative of the year. At the request of Radovan Karadzic, the Bosnian Serbs’ leader, Carter sought to broker a temporary ceasefire between the warring Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Muslims. In 1992, the Bosnian Muslims had declared independence from Yugoslavia, where Serbs represented the majority. The result of this split was a civil war that killed an estimated 100,000 civilians and military personnel.⁶³ Therefore, after receiving permission from Clinton to negotiate as a private citizen representing the Carter Center, Carter met with both Karadzic and Alija Izetbegovic, president of Bosnia’s majority Muslim government, in an attempt to arrest the violence and restart a dialogue between the two parties. On December 23, Carter emerged from negotiations with an agreement from the leaders to abide by a ceasefire and begin peace talks. It was a significant accomplishment, though the ceasefire only lasted for about a month. At the end of January, fighting erupted once again, and it intensified after the ceasefire officially expired in April. Seeking another way to stop the violence, Clinton regained the initiative and called for assistant secretary of state Richard Holbrooke to host a peace summit in Dayton, Ohio. Holbrooke, who had solicited Carter’s advice prior to the meeting, successfully brokered an agreement that the parties signed on December 14, 1995.⁶⁴

⁶² Eleanor Clift, “A Man With a Mission,” *Newsweek*, 3 October 1994, 36.

⁶³ “Behind the Madness,” *New York Times*, 22 July 2008, A10.

⁶⁴ Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 453.

After Carter's involvement in Bosnia, there was considerable debate in the media about to what extent his ceasefire laid the groundwork for an eventual accord. Like his work in North Korea and Haiti, Carter's activities in Bosnia polarized the news media, with some reporters and columnists denouncing him for coddling the dictator Karadzic and others praising his willingness to help resolve the civil war. But there was one aspect of Carter's work on which both sides seemed to agree: it was important and worthy of news coverage. The former president had once again seized the national and international spotlight, using his reputation as a humanitarian activist in an attempt to resolve a foreign conflict. For the third time in a year, Carter pursued a pressing diplomatic initiative that landed him on the front pages of the major newspapers.

Many of the positive press articles on Carter's work in Bosnia highlighted his previous humanitarian activities as a framework for interpreting his newest endeavor. For example, commenting on Carter's successful diplomatic efforts over the past year, Thomas Lippman of the *Washington Post* began his news article on Bosnia by humorously noting the inevitable nature of Carter's involvement: "Who ya gonna call? Jimmy Carter, who else?... Twice earlier this year, in North Korea and in Haiti, Carter's freelance diplomacy pulled the Clinton administration back from the brink of conflict, brokering deals that had eluded official negotiators. Now the messianic peacemaker has entered the Bosnia quagmire at the behest of Karadzic..."⁶⁵

Two other pieces in the *Post* were notable for their praise of Carter's ceasefire in Bosnia. In a news article, John Pomfret comically characterized the former president's work: "... Jimmy Carter waded into the Balkan morass and emerged without getting any

⁶⁵ Thomas W. Lippman, "The Mediator's Strength: 'I'm Not Taking Sides,'" *Washington Post*, 15 December 1994, A39.

visible mud on his spanking white turtleneck – or on his record of foreign policy free-lancing. And while what he obtained was limited and still tentative, it was also significant.”⁶⁶ While criticizing Carter for occasionally mispronouncing Slavic names and confusing ethnic groups, Richard Cohen editorialized that “Whatever the outcome in Bosnia, Jimmy Carter surely deserves his Nobel, not to mention the respect of those who are so quick to dismiss his efforts. He was not a great president, but he is indisputably a great ex-president. That record, not his manner, commends him to history – if not the Nobel committee.”⁶⁷

Perhaps the most common form of press coverage after the Bosnia ceasefire was guarded praise. Many publications were willing to recognize Carter’s hard work, but they were reluctant to credit him with any enduring achievement. Carter was both criticized for ignoring Karadzic’s history of violence and commended for moving the peace process forward. In an editorial, for example, the *New York Times* chastised Carter for downplaying the “ethnic cleansing, mass rapes and other atrocities committed by Mr. Karadzic’s followers...” But the *Times* concluded the editorial by conceding that “if Mr. Carter succeeds in reopening peace talks...he will have made a valuable contribution.”⁶⁸ The *Washington Post* was similarly cautious in its praise, lauding Carter as a “man of peace,” but criticizing Clinton for once again outsourcing his presidential duties to the former president, who has “all too often been a loose cannon.”⁶⁹

A month after Carter’s ceasefire agreement, the *New York Times* ran an extended feature story in the Sunday magazine about Carter’s post-presidency. In the article,

⁶⁶ John Pomfret, “Carter’s Down-Home Style Eased Way for Accord,” *Washington Post*, 22 December 1994, A27.

⁶⁷ Richard Cohen, “In Defense of the Carter Post-Presidency,” *Washington Post*, 27 December 1994, A15.

⁶⁸ “A Little Help From Jimmy Carter,” *New York Times*, 21 December 1994, A26.

⁶⁹ “Playing President,” *Washington Post*, 12 December 1994, A24.

entitled “The Conciliator,” Jim Wooten spent a considerable amount of space diagnosing what makes Carter such a complex and captivating figure, a man who is lavishly praised by some and harshly criticized by others. In one paragraph, Wooten was particularly shrewd in illuminating the multiple forces that shape people’s perceptions of Carter’s post-presidency:

The odds and public opinion be damned, he does what he does – in Plains, in Panama, in Pyongyang, in Port-au-Prince and, last month, in Pale, as an exercise in high morality, altogether genuine and sincere; but there is also about it just the trace of the nettlesome righteousness that alienated much of Washington during his tenure there, the not-so-subtle suggestion that while he might be *in* politics, he is not *of* politics and certainly not, God forbid, a politician. (*italics his*)

Wooten also aptly encapsulated the frequent criticism of Carter as too willing to appease dictators and ignore their records of violence and devastation. While the “core of his approach is a suspension of judgment on the people across the table,” for many Americans, Carter “is often seen as an appeaser in the Chamberlain mold, a loose cannon rolling about on the decks of official foreign policy.”⁷⁰

While Wooten’s article is not a paean to Carter, it is nevertheless an important barometer of the extent to which the former president had become a subject worthy of national debate. In a sense, the fact that the *New York Times* ran a nine-page article about Carter in the Sunday magazine testifies to his enduring relevance for the news media and the American public. The *existence* of this article, not only its *content*, demonstrates Carter’s return to prominence. And this fundamental argument also applies to the other news stories about Carter’s work in Bosnia. To be sure, some publications praised Carter’s determination to resolve the war in Bosnia; but many of the major newspapers

⁷⁰ Jim Wooten, “The Conciliator,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 29 January 1995, SM28.

were decidedly circumspect in their commentary on the ceasefire. Nevertheless, the fact that the *Times* and the *Post* were publishing lead editorials and front-page news stories on Carter's trip to Bosnia signaled the extent to which the former president was a sustained focus of media attention throughout the mid-1990s.

During the latter half of the decade, Carter continued his humanitarian work, monitoring elections in places as varied as Liberia, Jamaica, Indonesia, Guyana, Nigeria, and the West Bank and Gaza. He worked to eradicate Guinea worm disease in some of the most impoverished countries and helped Habitat for Humanity build houses in the Philippines and South Korea.⁷¹

Carter also published a number of books during the 1990s, which further established his reputation as a prolific author. These books include *Turning Point; Talking Peace; Living Faith; Always a Reckoning, and Other Poems*; and *The Virtues of Aging*. As previously argued, Carter's books are certainly a notable part of his post-presidency, but they alone cannot account for his enhanced status. Indeed, if Carter's primary pursuit had been writing, he would not have enjoyed the same revived reputation as he did by the mid-1990s. It required high-profile diplomatic and humanitarian activities to capture the attention of the press and the public—and Carter clearly knew that.

Even though Carter's activities in the late nineties did not receive the attention of his earlier diplomatic forays to North Korea, Haiti, and Bosnia, the press continued to write about the former president, often quite positively. In August 1999, for example, after Clinton awarded the Carters the Medal of Freedom for doing "more good things for more

⁷¹ Jennifer Ryan, "Former President Jimmy Carter: Globe-Trotting Georgian," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 13 October 2002.

people than any other couple on earth,”⁷² Dusty Nix of the *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* editorialized that the Carters “deserve this award, along with the gratitude of literally millions of people.” He also praised Carter for making the phrase “ ‘human rights’ part of the lexicon of American politics.”⁷³ In another editorial, the *Ledger-Enquirer* commemorated Carter’s 75th birthday by celebrating his post-presidential accomplishments: “Few if any ex-presidents have comported themselves with more dignity and grace than Jimmy Carter. None has done more for the poor and for humanity in general.”⁷⁴

In early 2000, the *New York Times* also published a retrospective piece on Carter’s post-presidency. In the article, entitled “Enjoying the Ex-Presidency? Never Been Better,” Sara Rimer chronicled the many successes of Carter’s time out of office and noted his growing popularity among the American public. Rimer also argued that the publication of Douglas Brinkley’s book, *The Unfinished Presidency*, testifies to the extent to which “Mr. Carter’s life since the White House has been so overfull and so distinguished.”⁷⁵ What Rimer did not point out was that *The Unfinished Presidency* made Carter one of the only presidents whose post-presidency was the subject of an entire book, a distinction that underscores his success since leaving office.

Carter’s post-presidential career culminated in his winning of the Nobel Peace Prize in October 2002, which celebrated his “decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote

⁷² Melinda Henneberger, “Clinton Gives Medals and Compliments to the Carters,” *New York Times*, 10 August 1999, A13.

⁷³ Dusty Nix, “Carters Are Ambassadors for Decency, Integrity,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 11 August 1999, A8.

⁷⁴ Billy Winn, “Years Later, Nation Rediscovered Jimmy Carter,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 5 October 1999, A6.

⁷⁵ Sara Rimer, “Enjoying the Ex-Presidency? Never Been Better,” *New York Times*, 16 February 2000, H1.

economic and social development."⁷⁶ This event was widely perceived as the definitive mark of Carter's transformation from failed president to acclaimed peacemaker. Since leaving office, Carter had devoted his life to promoting human rights, eradicating disease, and disseminating democracy, and now he had a Nobel Prize to show for it. Prior to winning the award, Carter would often bristle when asked if his humanitarian efforts were a means to winning the prize. As Elizabeth Kurylo observes, "He was very defensive if anybody suggested he did this to win the Nobel. But then he relaxed a bit after he won...It was as if everything was leading up to that moment."⁷⁷ Regardless of whether Carter had sought the prize—or to what extent this proved a motivating factor in his humanitarian work—the debate was now rendered moot. He was the recipient of the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize.

Carter's award elicited accolades from many newspapers and magazines, which used the occasion to reflect on his post-presidency and extol some of his humanitarian accomplishments. In this sense, many journalists viewed the Nobel as solidifying Carter's reputation as a stalwart activist for peace—a startling transformation in coverage given the intense criticism of his during his presidency. For example, the *New York Times* began its editorial by writing that "Jimmy Carter well deserves the Nobel Peace Prize awarded him yesterday." After recognizing that "not all of Mr. Carter's peacemaking efforts have succeeded," the *Times* applauded the former president for all his work, asserting that "the totality of his career has significantly enhanced the cause of peace."⁷⁸ For its part, the *Washington Post* also ran an editorial praising Carter, who

⁷⁶ The Nobel Foundation. "The Nobel Peace Prize 2002, (Nobel Prize, 2002), http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2002/index.html (accessed February 10, 2010).

⁷⁷ Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/13/10.

⁷⁸ "Nobel Achievements: A Lifetime of Public Service," *New York Times*, 12 October 2002, A20.

“became an activist, working for peace and human rights in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. No other ex-president has been so active and involved in world affairs. Carter zips around like a global fireman, going to the spots of conflict, tropical diseases or elections that might be conducted unfairly.”⁷⁹

After Carter won the Nobel, the Southern newspapers proved even more laudatory than the national publications. In the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the editorial board displayed its regional loyalty to Carter in arguing that “...the principles that permeate Carter’s life are rooted in the South Georgia Sunday school lessons and rocking-chair porches of Plains...Carter the peacemaker is a deserving winner of the Nobel prize. But most of all, he is one of us.”⁸⁰ The *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer* also commended Carter for his Nobel, starting its editorial by writing that “There’s no more deserving recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize than Jimmy Carter.”⁸¹

Even the *Wall Street Journal*, which was typically critical of Carter, conceded that the former president “is one of the most well meaning men in history, and we intend that as a compliment. A religious man, he has always looked for the good in people, especially America’s foreign adversaries...Out of office he has used his prestige to promote many good causes, including Habitat for Humanity.”⁸² If anything is indicative of the revised perceptions of Carter in the news media, it is perhaps this: that even the *Wall Street Journal* was willing, albeit guardedly, to praise Carter for his achievements since leaving office.

⁷⁹ “Comeback for Carter,” *Washington Post*, 16 October 2002, 16.

⁸⁰ “Carter’s Strength Is Plainly Georgia,” *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, 13 October 2002, H10.

⁸¹ Michael Owen, “Carter Earned Nobel, a Place in History,” *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, 12 October 2002, A18.

⁸² “Jimmy Carter’s Nobel Intentions,” *Wall Street Journal*, 14 October 2002, A16.

For Carter, winning the Nobel Prize seemed to represent the zenith of his post-presidential career. After twenty years of working tirelessly for humanitarian causes, Carter had been awarded one of the most prestigious prizes given to human rights activists. It was a clear acknowledgement of how far he had come since leaving office in 1981, when he was widely derided as feckless and indecisive, ostensibly consigned to live out his life overseeing the completion of his library and delivering speeches. To be sure, Carter still had his detractors when he won the prize, especially those in government and the media who claimed he appeased dictators or exhibited an ostentatious piety that made him insufferably self-righteous. But in general, Carter's acceptance of the Nobel served as the culmination of his return to prominence in American political life. Many journalists began—or continued, in some cases—hailing Carter as the country's best former president. Previously regarded in the media as a failed president, Carter was now considered an indefatigable human rights activist. Over the past twenty years, journalists had completely revised the way they wrote about Carter. The former president's image in the press was indeed wholly revamped, a process culminating in Carter's reception of the Nobel Prize.

Chapter Four: “Peace Provocateur”

[Bad Jimmy] gathered the kindling of Good Jimmy’s name, doused it with the gasoline of Middle East politics and ignited it all with the spark of his long-simmering animosity toward Israel. After the publication of Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid... Good Jimmy’s hard work lay in ashes.¹

On November 14, 2006, Jimmy Carter became the most controversial former president in American history. This date marked the publication of his twenty-third book, *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid*, the twenty-first book he had published since leaving office. Part memoir and part policy plan, the book presents Carter’s observations of peace negotiations in the Middle East, beginning with his trip to the region as Georgia governor in 1973. Throughout his prolific career as an author, Carter had always used his books to attract the national spotlight when he had something to say. Writing was a way for him to remind Americans of his own enduring relevance and impress upon them the sagacity of his insights, especially in matters of foreign policy.

In this way, Carter was not unlike Richard Nixon, who used his post-presidency to publish several critically acclaimed books consisting of policy prescriptions for international conflicts. Both men saw writing as a vehicle for burnishing their reputations by offering incisive advice on foreign affairs. But while Nixon often seemed like the closeted elder statesman, consigned to perpetual solitude and thankless hard work—as if Watergate had permanently banished him to a political purgatory from which he could never emerge—Carter was exactly the opposite: he yearned for the public attention, for the promotional tour that would inevitably follow publication. He wanted the spotlight. And unlike Nixon, he retained the political and social capital to make these public

¹ David Greenberg, “Good Jimmy, Bad Jimmy,” *Washington Post*, 14 October 2007, BW6.

appearances. While Carter may have been a failed president, he certainly was not a disgraced president. Nixon could not say the same.

* * *

In many ways, *Peace Not Apartheid* is similar to some of Carter's previous books. He presents a detailed set of political principles for peace, examines his presidential successors' involvement in the peace process, and analyzes the various peace agreements, including the Oslo Accords, the Geneva Initiative, and the Roadmap for Peace. But in what became the most contentious section, Carter denounces the security wall the Israeli government erected in 2002 between Israel and the West Bank, which was an attempt to prevent Palestinian terrorists from penetrating into Israel. With the construction of the wall, Carter argues, Israel's leaders were "utilizing their political and military dominance" to impose "a system of partial withdrawal, encapsulation, and apartheid on the Muslim and Christian citizens of the occupied territories."² This argument, and especially Carter's use of apartheid, was the primary source of sustained criticism for the book. Carter also drew fire for contending that "Israel's continued control and colonization of Palestinian land have been the primary obstacles to a comprehensive peace agreement in the Holy Land."³ Many journalists, academics, and government officials protested this view of Israel, arguing that Carter minimized Palestinian violence and focused disproportionately on Israel's actions.

Before further discussing *Peace Not Apartheid*, it is imperative to examine Carter's diction in describing Israel's security wall. While he makes the distinction between the "dividing wall in populated areas" and an "impassable fence in rural areas," Carter's

² Jimmy Carter. *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 189.

³ *Ibid.*, 208

criticism is most often directed at the “wall” or “barrier,” terms that evoke restriction and prohibition. Indeed, the chapter describing the structure is entitled “The Wall As A Prison,” ostensible proof that Carter views the “wall” specifically as the primary obstacle to peace. In contrast, many Israelis often refer to the structure as a “fence,” which is considerably more benign in its connotations. Since this chapter is devoted to Carter’s book, “wall” will henceforth be used to describe the structure. It is nevertheless important to recognize that Carter is deploying this word deliberately, with full knowledge of its negative implications.

The publication of *Peace Not Apartheid* and the subsequent outcry must be evaluated with Carter’s motives in mind: he sought to ignite a debate about the Middle East peace process, situating himself at the center of that debate. As he notes in an “Afterword” to one of his earlier books, “after going six years without any serious peace negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians, the only way to get people moving was to be provocative.”⁴ Since no one had restarted meaningful negotiations, Carter took it upon himself to get the two sides talking again. Considering his desire for recognition, his method for initiating a dialogue is hardly surprising: he published a book that is provocative, audacious, and stubborn—and pure Carter. The jacket cover broadcast his views of his role in mediating the conflict: Carter’s face, which takes up almost half the cover, is shown gazing purposefully at a juxtaposed image of the separation wall. With his hands resting beneath his chin, he seems pensive, as if he is contemplating the ramifications of the wall for Palestinian society. The implication is clear: here is a man who has the intelligence, determination, and tenacity to stop Israel’s oppression of the

⁴ Jimmy Carter. *The Blood of Abraham* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1985), 211.

Palestinian people. Carter wanted to be provocative, and he certainly achieved his objective.

Carter has arguably been more aggressive and outspoken on this conflict than on any other, which begs the question of why. One explanation is that his concern is rooted in religion, a subject that has served as a guiding force in his life. Given Carter's devotion to Christianity, he envisions peace in the Middle East as part of God's plan for humanity. Arabs, Jews and Christians, Carter writes, are all descendents of Abraham, and too much blood "has been spilled in grasping for the inheritance of the revered patriarch in the Middle East. The spilled blood in the Holy Land still cries out to God—an anguished cry for peace."⁵ Carter's religious devotion translates into an effusive admiration of the territory of Israel, which he has called the "land of the Bible."⁶ Writing about his first visit to the Middle East in 1973, Carter demonstrates this intense emotional attachment to the "Holy Land," emphasizing the importance of honoring and preserving Christian holy places in Israel and stressing the need to make them available for Christian worship.⁷ Indeed, in some of his remarks, Carter seems particularly concerned that war in the "Holy Land" could deprive Christians of their most revered places of worship.

Over the last thirty years, Carter has also repeatedly voiced concerns that the Israelis were persecuting Christian citizens, an opinion that, given his Christian beliefs, could partially explain his views of Israel. Furthermore, while Carter acknowledges the right of the Jews "who had survived the Holocaust" to establish their own homeland, he justifies

⁵ Jimmy Carter. *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 19.

⁶ Jimmy Carter. *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982), 280.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 281.

this stance by saying it is in accord with the Bible, and “hence ordained by God.”⁸ These examples demonstrate the centrality of Carter’s faith to his vision for the Middle East. His religion is an important framework through which he interprets the Arab-Israeli conflict, and this worldview has compelled him to remain involved in the Middle East peace process.

A close examination of Carter’s activism reveals that the Arab-Israeli dispute remains the only major conflict during his post-presidency that explicitly involves religion and religious difference. This fact is significant because it attests to Carter’s willingness to adopt an increasingly aggressive tone in matters directly relating to his own faith. And the evolving media coverage of Carter reflects this trend: the favorable media representations of Carter in the 1980s and 1990s focused mostly on his secular activities like election monitoring and arms conferences. The adulatory news media reports of these years portrayed Carter’s success as a diplomat and elder statesman, representing him as a pragmatic thinker dedicated to ensuring equality and human rights. On the other hand, the negative media coverage of Carter has largely been centered around his statements about the Arab-Israeli dispute, a highly charged religious issue in which Carter feels emotionally and spiritually invested. When it comes to religious matters, Carter’s responses are often more visceral and strident because of his own Christian faith. Since Israel is the venerated “Holy Land” in Christianity, Carter feels obligated to stop the bloodshed between the Israelis and Palestinians—and he has often tried to do so by making bold pronouncements that fault Israel with most of the blame.

⁸ Jimmy Carter. *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982), 281.

It was in the early 1980s that Carter began to use his post-presidency to delve more intensively into the issue, shuttling between various countries in the Middle East to meet with controversial foreign leaders like President Hafez al-Assad of Syria, whom Washington labeled a brutal dictator, and representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which did not recognize Israel's right to exist.⁹ These experiences are recounted in *The Blood of Abraham* (1985), which is fashioned as a historical primer on the Middle East, with each chapter devoted to a different country and its strategic interests. In the book, Carter explains that one of the main purposes of his 1983 visit to the region was to “know more about the Palestinian people—how they were living, their foremost concerns, how they reacted to existence under a prolonged military occupation, and what they might propose as a peaceful solution.”¹⁰

During this trip, Carter cultivated a keen sensitivity to the problems of the Palestinian people, sympathizing with their desire for an unoccupied homeland and unencumbered access to basic resources like education, food, and housing.¹¹ He began to criticize Israeli leaders for failing to abide by the Camp David Accords, faulting them for not granting actual autonomy to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.¹² In one telling anecdote, Carter could barely conceal his frustration with the Israeli troops, which, while accompanying him on a morning run through Jerusalem, knocked over the newspapers of Arab men reading on the street corner. Seeing these actions as unprovoked and malicious, Carter “told the soldiers to either to let me run alone or not to touch anyone

⁹ Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 105, 112.

¹⁰ Jimmy Carter. *The Blood of Abraham* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1985), 109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

¹² Edward Walsh, “Carter Criticizes Israeli Position on Autonomy,” *Washington Post*, 12 March 1983, 13.

else in a belligerent manner.”¹³ For Carter, this incident was indicative of life under Israeli occupation: the Arabs were accorded few rights and relegated to second-class status. They were a dispossessed people, suffering severe deprivation in a land they once called their own.

These passages from *The Blood of Abraham* are important because they suggest another lens through which Carter perceives this conflict. While achieving peace in the Middle East is paramount for him due to its religious implications, it also resonates with him as a human rights issue. Indeed, Carter sees the conflict as a humanitarian problem and envisions himself as working to give a voice to the silenced and oppressed Palestinian people.¹⁴ This may serve as one explanation for Carter’s staunch support of the Palestinians and criticism of Israel. In his view, the Palestinian people are victims of human rights abuses, and establishing a permanent homeland for them has become yet another humanitarian problem that needs his attention. Given his dedication to human rights as president, “it was impossible for me to ignore the very serious problems on the West Bank. The continued deprivation of Palestinian rights was not only used as the primary lever against Israel, but was contrary to the basic moral and ethical principles of both our countries.”¹⁵ In this way, Carter situates his activism within a humanitarian framework that views the Palestinians as a deprived and bereft people. He therefore sees it as his duty to alleviate their suffering and ensure an eventual homeland for them.

The press reviews of *The Blood of Abraham* were the beginning of Carter’s fraught relationship with the news media regarding his views on the Arab-Israeli conflict. And as

¹³ Jimmy Carter. *The Blood of Abraham* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1985), 109.

¹⁴ Ken Stein. “The Middle East,” Presentation at the University of Michigan, 26 March 2009.

¹⁵ Jimmy Carter. *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1982), 277.

time went on, this relationship would only deteriorate. In reviews of the book, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* discerned Carter's increasing tendency to portray the Palestinians as victims and the Israelis as aggressors. The *Post*'s Stephen Rosenfield attributed Carter's views to his past difficulties with Menachem Begin, Israel's prime minister during Camp David, who often proved an intransigent negotiator, especially when it came to the issue of West Bank settlements.

I say Carter soured on Israel. I think he also sweetened on the Arabs. The evenhandedness he professed and practiced while in power has since yielded to a scarcely concealed on-sidedness. Carter's writing now conveys an unmistakable sense that the plight of the Palestinians is paramount in his mind, touches him to the moral quick, that Israel is responsible for the Palestinians' continuing tragedy, that Israel has fallen from grace.¹⁶

Bernard Gwertzman of the *Times* made a similar observation: "And what does come through, despite Mr. Carter's efforts to be evenhanded, is his sympathy for the Palestinian and Arab causes and his impatience with and criticism of Israeli leaders, particularly Mr. Begin, with whom he sharply clashed when he was President."¹⁷ In this way, starting with the release of *The Blood of Abraham*, many journalists became openly critical of Carter's views. He seemed to be compromising his legacy as an impartial negotiator—a legacy dating from Camp David—by repeatedly making statements that showed scant recognition of Israel's historical struggle for statehood, but instead focused almost exclusively on the dire living conditions of Palestinians in the occupied territories.

Carter has never been timid about speaking out on behalf of people he identifies as oppressed. But while this quality is often critical in calling attention to human rights

¹⁶ Stephen S. Rosenfield, "Presidential Pasts," *Washington Post*, 31 March 1985, 1.

¹⁷ Bernard Gwertzman, "Books of the Times," *New York Times*, 18 April 1985, C25.

abuses, it has proved one of his biggest problems when it comes to peace in the Middle East. Whenever Carter makes a public statement—in the form of a book, an opinion editorial, or a speech—he does so in a grandstanding and ostentatious way. He issues bold proclamations intended to captivate audiences and galvanize them to take action on behalf of the persecuted.

As has often been noted in the press, however, Carter’s tone can sound self-righteous and moralizing, as if he is preaching to his Baptist Sunday school class back in Plains. Eleanor Clift, the *Newsweek* reporter, acknowledges the backlash Carter’s tone often creates: when he “gets up on his moral high horse, it makes you want to rebel.”¹⁸ This tone can be crucial in defusing crises, as it was when Carter persuaded Daniel Ortega to accept his defeat after the 1989 elections in Panama. But for an issue as fraught and delicate as the Arab-Israeli conflict, with neither side being definitively “right,” Carter’s certitude about the victimization of the Palestinians and the culpability of the Israelis has seemed stubborn and irresponsible.

What makes Carter’s activism so successful—or infuriating, depending on the audience—is his ability to utilize his status as a former president to disseminate his opinions about Israel. There are plenty of people who impugn Israel for perpetrating abuses against Palestinians in the occupied territories. But since Carter is an ex-president, his opinion gets more attention. Obviously, what he says matters more than what the average person says. As Ken Stein, a former executive director and Middle East fellow at the Carter Center, emphasizes, “Because he’s a former president, there’s a different set of rules. He can get any *New York Times* article he wants. He has all the

¹⁸ Interview with Eleanor Clift in Washington, D.C., 3/1/10.

access he wants.”¹⁹ As Stein notes, Carter is uniquely positioned to espouse any of his opinions and be heard by virtually everyone—even if these opinions are deemed hypocritical or anti-historical.

In 1990, five years after *The Blood of Abraham* was published, Carter delivered one of his bold proclamations at a news conference in Jerusalem. He denounced the Israelis for wantonly shooting Palestinian demonstrators, destroying their homes, and imprisoning them without trial. “There is hardly a family that lives in the West Bank and Gaza that has not had one of its male members actually incarcerated by the military authorities,” Carter said in front of reporters.²⁰ In his view, he was rightly publicizing Israel’s human rights abuses against the Palestinians, a sentiment he expressed a week later at a press conference in Atlanta: “Former President Jimmy Carter said Friday that he makes no apology for defending the human rights of Palestinians and criticizing Israel for its actions in the occupied territories.”²¹ After *The Blood of Abraham* was published, Carter became an increasingly ardent advocate for the Palestinian cause—as well as a critic of Israel and its human rights abuses.

Carter’s outspokenness on the Arab-Israeli conflict has severely damaged his image in the news media. While the press has favorably portrayed many of his post-presidential humanitarian activities, this has not been the case in its coverage of the former president as a mediator in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Carter’s statements about Israel have drawn the ire of the mainstream press, signaling a marked departure from the glowing reports of his successful election monitoring and disease eradication efforts. For example, after Carter

¹⁹ Ken Stein. “The Middle East,” Presentation at the University of Michigan, 26 March 2009.

²⁰ “Carter Criticizes Israelis on Palestinian Rights,” *New York Times*, 20 March 1990, 7.

²¹ Elizabeth Kurylo, “Carter Defends Palestinian Rights Despite Criticism from U.S. Jews,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 31 March 1990, A6.

condemned Israel for human rights abuses at the press conference in Jerusalem mentioned above, the *New York Times* columnist A.M. Rosenthal fired back at Carter, denouncing him as a hypocrite for assailing Israel while not criticizing tyrannical Arab states like Syria. “Perhaps Mr. Carter and other decent travelers should consider [their hypocrisy] the next time they tour the Middle East. If they feel unable to tell the truth everywhere, maybe they should stay home.”²²

In Rosenthal’s opinion, Carter was employing a “growing double standard” by censoring Israel’s democracy while staying silent about oppressive Arab regimes. This criticism is redolent of other lines of attack claiming Carter placates dictators and selectively ignores human rights abuses when it is convenient for his humanitarian or diplomatic missions. In 1994, this particular criticism was leveled against him during his dealings with Gen. Raoul Cedras in Haiti, Kim Il Sung in North Korea, and Radovan Karadzic in Bosnia. But in criticizing Israel, Carter was challenging a historically robust pro-Israel sentiment in America, a sentiment that simply does not exist for countries like Haiti, North Korea, or Bosnia.

Moreover, in the context of the Arab-Israeli dispute, Carter’s “double standard” is even more problematic because the two sides are so fiercely divided. When he met with Yasir Arafat of the PLO, or with Hamas, the Islamic militant group, Carter undoubtedly had honest intentions. He saw his efforts as an attempt to reach out to politically marginalized groups, but his actions ended up alienating many people, especially American Jews, who found themselves questioning how Carter could be working for human rights while supporting organizations implicated in terrorist activities.

²² A.M. Rosenthal, “Silence is a Lie,” *New York Times*, 22 March 1990, 27.

And yet this tactic has always been Carter's preferred way to mediate conflicts. Over the past thirty years, he has prided himself on engaging with the international outcasts, the pariahs with whom few major leaders would dare negotiate. (Or, if they did, they would potentially suffer a loss of political capital, a problem that is not as serious for former presidents.) Steven Hochman, a professor of history and Carter's personal research assistant since 1981, affirms the former president's approach to dealing with controversial groups or leaders: "He believes you should deal with everybody. He thinks there's more to be won dealing with these people than there is to be lost."²³ In Carter's view, "these people" included leaders like Yasir Arafat who were inimical to Israelis.

While monitoring the Palestinians' inaugural democratic election in 1996, Carter was willing to condemn Israeli actions but also to uncritically accept Arafat as a fair and judicious leader of the Palestinians—a decision that was fodder for people looking to charge Carter with appeasing dictators. During the election, he singled out the Israelis for "doing everything they can to intimidate the Palestinians,"²⁴ and yet subsequently assumed that Arafat, who some people previously scorned as a terrorist, would be a just and democratic leader. In this instance, Carter was clearly holding the Israelis and Palestinians to different standards. Even Douglas Brinkley, Carter's largely sympathetic biographer, pointed out the former president's odd miscalculation, writing that "Carter's close personal relationship with Arafat may have kept him from seeing the duplicitous side of the Palestinian president...Carter was perhaps misguided to view him as a man of peace: Arafat was, in fact, a shrewd Palestinian nationalist maintaining autocratic control

²³ Interview with Steven Hochman at the Carter Center in Atlanta, GA, 11/30/2009.

²⁴ Serge Schmemmann, "Arafat Backed In First Voting By Palestinians," *New York Times*, 21 January 1996, A1.

over his people.”²⁵ The 1996 Palestinian elections were yet another occasion when Carter decided to use his pedestal to champion Palestinian rights and criticize Israelis for curtailing those rights.

* * *

But nothing has caused as much uproar as the publication of *Palestine Peace Not Apartheid* in December 2006. As the *New York Times* reported, Carter’s promotional book tour “has escalated into a full-scale furor, with Mr. Carter being trailed by protesters at book signings, criticized on newspaper op-ed pages and, on the normally sedate ‘Book TV’ program on C-Span 2, being called a racist and an anti-Semite by an indignant caller.”²⁶ Indeed, Carter’s increasingly strident remarks about the Arab-Israeli conflict seemed to culminate with this book, which many journalists interpreted as the most egregious evidence of his pro-Palestinian bias. Reviewing the book in the *Washington Post*, Jeffrey Goldberg assailed Carter for his “anti-historical” understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict, writing that the former president legitimized Palestinian violence as merely a response to Israel’s transgression of building settlements. Goldberg also noted that “Carter, not unlike God, has long been disproportionately interested in the sins of the Chosen People. He is famously a partisan of the Palestinians, and in recent months he has offered a notably benign view of Hamas, the Islamist terrorist organization...”²⁷

In Goldberg’s assessment, Carter’s examination of the Arab-Israeli conflict was myopic, as Carter minimizes the importance of Israeli deaths and asserts unsubstantiated claims about Israeli brutality toward Christians. Goldberg even proposed that Carter has

²⁵ Douglas Brinkley. *The Unfinished Presidency* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998), 469.

²⁶ Julie Bosman, “Carter View of Israeli ‘Apartheid’ Stirs Furor,” *New York Times*, 14 December 2006, E1.

²⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg, “What Would Jimmy Do?” *Washington Post Book World*, 10 December 2006, 3.

a certain agenda in writing his book: he intends to encourage American Evangelicals to question their unyielding support for Israel.²⁸ Whether or not Goldberg's assertion is actually true, his scathing review serves as an example of the opprobrium the ex-president has generated because of his book. Once a model of humanitarianism and good will, Carter's image in the press has been overshadowed by intense criticism of his involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. The widespread approbation he received for his earlier activities was rapidly eroding as he addressed one of the most intractable conflicts of the day.

Goldberg was one of many journalists who found Carter's book tendentious and unfair. Ethan Bronner, currently the Jerusalem bureau chief for the *New York Times*, reached conclusions strikingly similar to Goldberg's in a review for the paper in January 2007. Bronner wrote that Carter "simply offers a narrative that is largely unsympathetic to Israel. Israeli bad faith fills the pages. Hollow statements by Israeli's enemies are presented without comment. Broader regional developments go largely unexamined... whether or not Carter is right that most Americans have a distorted view of the conflict, his contribution is to offer a distortion of his own."²⁹ The argument that Carter neglected larger geopolitical developments is one that resonated with Deborah Lipstadt, a professor at Emory University, who wrote in the *Washington Post* that the former president "ignores a legacy of mistreatment, expulsion and murder committed against Jews. It trivializes the murder of Israelis," and "makes two fleeting references to the Holocaust." Lipstadt concluded her review by asserting that "A man who has done

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ethan Bronner, "Jews, Arabs, and Jimmy Carter," *New York Times*, 7 January 2007, 25.

much good and who wants to bring peace has not only failed to move the peace process forward but has given refuge to scoundrels.”³⁰

One of the most salient critiques of *Peace Not Apartheid* was from Emory professor Ken Stein, who severed his ties with the Center shortly after the book was published, citing its “inaccuracies” and “its message, which contradicts the Carter Center’s founding purposes.” He declined to be interviewed for this thesis, but his extensive critique of the book in the *Middle East Quarterly* serves as a detailed explanation of his problems both with Carter and the text. Stein’s article encapsulated many of the most common criticisms of the former president’s work, including the objection that the book “contains egregious errors of both commission and omission. To suit his desired ends, he manipulates information, redefines facts, and exaggerates conclusions.”³¹

Since Stein had worked with Carter for nearly twenty-five years before resigning his post at the Carter Center, he was capable of providing an extended portrait of the former president’s evolving views on the Middle East peace process. After considering Carter’s public statements and published work, Stein observed that Carter has become increasingly strident in his criticism of Israel, a point that has been argued in this chapter. Stein wrote that Carter “has shifted from annoyance to exasperation, from frustration to anger, and from partial blame upon the Palestinians to their exculpation.”³² With this comment, Stein implied what many scholars and political commentators had already concluded: the publication of *Peace Not Apartheid* inflicted permanent damage on Carter’s image as a negotiator for the Arab-Israeli conflict.

³⁰ Deborah Lipstadt, “Jimmy Carter’s Jewish Problem,” *Washington Post*, 20 January 2007, A23.

³¹ Ken Stein. “My Problem with Jimmy Carter’s Book,” *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. XIV: no. 2 (2007): 3.

³² *Ibid.*, 8.

Stein was not the only person affiliated with the Carter Center to leave his post after the book was published. In an event that made national news, fourteen Jewish members of the Center's advisory board resigned in protest of *Peace Not Apartheid*, citing the book's unqualified criticism of the Israeli occupation and its suggestion that the pro-Israel lobby in the U.S. suppresses any serious discussion of the conflict. The board members' letter of resignation repudiated Carter for his "malicious advocacy" and "strident and uncompromising position" on the Arab-Israeli conflict, and it lamented that "This is not the Carter Center or the Jimmy Carter we came to respect and support."³³

But Steven Hochman, Carter's personal adviser, downplays the members' resignation, saying that they were not members of the board of trustees, but rather part of the board of councilors, which is comprised of influential business and political leaders from Atlanta with no actual governing authority or responsibility at the Center. He also contrasts the response of the board of councilors with that of the board of trustees, which has several prominent American Jews, none of whom resigned.³⁴ Even taking into account Hochman's distinction between the two different boards, though, the mass resignation sent a strong public statement of anger about Carter's evolving views on the Middle East peace process.

Some of the most vociferous criticism of Carter stemmed from his decision to use the word "apartheid" in describing the effects of the Israeli separation wall. His inclusion of the word in the book's title only exacerbated the frustration of those who disagreed with his comparing Israel to apartheid South Africa in the first place. Michael Kinsley wrote in the *Washington Post* that it is "foolish and unfair" to compare Israel to the "white

³³ Brenda Goodman, "Advisers Quit Carter Center to Protest Mideast Book," *New York Times*, 12 January 2007, A6.

³⁴ Interview with Dr. Steven Hochman at The Carter Center in Atlanta, GA, 11/30/2009.

racist government of South Africa.” This comparison is “unworthy of the man who won—and deserved—the Nobel Peace Prize for bringing Israel and Egypt together in the Camp David Accords, and who has lent such luster to the imaginary office of former president.”³⁵ The *New York Times* noted the outcry over the word apartheid, writing that the “bulk of the outrage has come from his use of the word apartheid in the title, apparently equating the plight of today’s Palestinians to the former victims of government-mandated racial separation in South Africa.”³⁶

And yet the decision to include the word apartheid in the title was vintage Jimmy Carter: provocative, controversial, and attention-grabbing. Carter knew the book would cause a stir; indeed, that was his intention. “He did that deliberately,” Eleanor Clift argues. “He wanted to break through, and he was willing to take the hit.”³⁷ In a *Newsweek* interview with Clift, Carter himself acknowledged that “one of the purposes of the book was to provoke discussion, which is very rarely heard in this country, and to open up some possibility that we could rejuvenate or restart the peace talks in Israel that have been absent for six years.”³⁸ This statement was consistent with comments from Steven Hochman, who provided feedback to Carter on the original manuscript of the book. While Hochman says he disagreed with using “apartheid” because he thought it would prove “too provocative and inflammatory,” he stresses the importance of situating the book within the context of the stalled Middle East peace talks:

[Carter] really was frustrated about how the Bush administration was neglecting the Middle East peace process. He was getting older, and he was wondering if anything was going to happen. Bush had taken a one-

³⁵ Michael Kinsley, “It’s Not Apartheid,” *Washington Post*, 12 December 2006, A27.

³⁶ Julie Bosman, “Carter View of Israeli ‘Apartheid’ Stirs Furor,” *New York Times*, 14 December 2006, E1.

³⁷ Phone interview with Eleanor Clift, 3/17/10.

³⁸ Eleanor Clift, “Presidential Provocation,” *Newsweek*, 18 December 2006, 12.

sided approach. He had completely supported the Israeli right-wing position—this was the first time an administration has been so one-sided...Jimmy Carter wanted to speak out on this issue and get people thinking because he was very upset about the way things were going...He thought the provocative title would get attention. He said ‘apartheid’ had been used by Israelis to describe settlements in the West Bank.³⁹

Hochman also argues that the uproar over the title obscures the basic fact that the text itself is not very controversial. Too many critics, he says, “didn’t look at it [the actual text], but they saw the title and that upset them.” Hochman defends the book from those who claim that it is irresponsible and misinformed:

Every sentence has been read carefully and analyzed. The book was not meant to be the last word on the Middle East. It was meant to tell a story and bring attention to the issue. [Carter’s] not a scholar; he didn’t write this to get tenure. Some of the mistakes are extreme nitpicking mistakes...Was it a perfect book? Absolutely not. But it wasn’t a book that deserved the criticism it received.⁴⁰

Besides being criticized for using the word apartheid, Carter also drew fire for suggesting that “because of powerful political, economic, and religious forces in the United States, Israeli government decisions are rarely questioned or condemned, voices from Jerusalem dominate in our media, and most American citizens are unaware of circumstances in the occupied territories.”⁴¹ With this comment, Carter was delving into a debate about the power of the pro-Israel lobby in the U.S., a subject that was addressed in John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt’s controversial 2007 book, *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, which argues that the U.S.’s uncritical support of Israel is detrimental to both countries’ geopolitical interests. Mearsheimer and Walt cite Carter as

³⁹ Interview with Dr. Steven Hochman at The Carter Center, Atlanta, GA, 11/30/2009.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Jimmy Carter. *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 209.

a victim of the lobby, writing that the reaction to *Peace Not Apartheid* “perfectly illustrates” the ability of pro-Israel groups to “use their power to make sure that public discourse echoes its strategic and moral arguments.” The authors argued that the lobby prevented serious discussion about Carter’s book by starting a “vicious smear campaign against him” and branding the former president as an “anti-Semite and a ‘Jew-hater.’”⁴²

This thesis does not purport to resolve the Israel lobby debate—nor does it argue whether or not an Israel lobby even exists—but the topic must be discussed here both because Carter himself suggests the existence of a lobby and because Mearsheimer and Walt cite Carter as a victim of the lobby in their book. In this way, it is crucial to address what Carter, Walt, and Mearsheimer perceive as the Israel lobby and its effects on discourses about Israel within the U.S. Without such a discussion, it would be difficult to understand the reactions to *Peace Not Apartheid* and situate them within a larger context of criticism of Israel in the U.S.

Although the book’s statements about the Israel lobby offended some people, Carter did not retract them. Instead, he decided to publish an opinion piece in the *Los Angeles Times* elaborating on his belief that the lobby was culpable for preventing any honest discussion of Israel’s policies in America. He also argued that the lobby’s pervasive influence stifled any criticism of Israel in Congress:

For the last 30 years, I have witnessed and experienced the severe restraints on any free and balanced discussion of the facts. This reluctance to criticize any policies of the Israeli government is because of the extraordinary lobbying efforts of the American-Israel Political Action Committee and the absence of any significant contrary voices... It would be almost politically suicidal for members of Congress to espouse a balanced position between Israel and Palestine, to suggest that Israel

⁴² John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 9.

comply with international law or to speak in defense of justice or human rights for Palestinians.⁴³

This opinion article created a whole new set of problems for Carter. After the statement above, he generated even more controversy by suggesting a few paragraphs later that the negative press reaction to *Peace Not Apartheid* could partly be explained by the fact that many of the reviews were written by Jewish members of the media. He wrote that “Book reviews in the mainstream media have been written mostly by representatives of Jewish organizations who would be unlikely to visit the occupied territories, and their primary criticism is that the book is anti-Israel.”⁴⁴ This infuriated many people, including Deborah Lipstadt, who accused Carter of relying—“possibly unconsciously—on traditional anti-Semitic canards... Carter reflexively fell back on this kind of innuendo about Jewish control of the media and government.”⁴⁵ With his statements about the Israel lobby and the media, Carter only aroused more anger about his views on the Arab-Israeli conflict. He alienated a large swath of the press and the general public alike, and as a result, he was forced to try to mitigate the damage of both the book and his *Los Angeles Times* editorial.

While calling Carter a “victim” of the pro-Israel lobby may be an overstatement, a close examination of book reviews from non-mainstream publications in the U.S. and abroad suggests that, as Mearsheimer and Walt contend, *Peace Not Apartheid* was perhaps deprived of a fair assessment in the mainstream U.S. press.⁴⁶ Even though

⁴³ Jimmy Carter, “How I See Palestine,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 December 2006.

⁴⁴ Jimmy Carter, “How I See Palestine,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 December 2006.

⁴⁵ Deborah Lipstadt, “Jimmy Carter’s Jewish Problem,” *Washington Post*, 20 January 2007, A23.

⁴⁶ I define “mainstream U.S. press” as the sources I have primarily used in my thesis. They include the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*.

people like Lipstadt were offended by Carter's comment about Jews reviewing his book, in some respects his point is valid. As both Barry Jagoda and Steven Hochman point out, many of those who reviewed *Peace Not Apartheid* are Jews who have direct connections to the Arab-Israeli conflict. One example is Jeffrey Goldberg, an American Jew who holds Israeli citizenship and served in the Israeli Defense Forces. He subsequently wrote a book about his experience working as a prison guard at Ketziot, a detainee camp for Palestinians arrested during the first intifada in 1987.⁴⁷⁴⁸ Does Goldberg's background invalidate or devalue his criticism of *Peace Not Apartheid*? Of course not. But it is nevertheless important to recognize that some of the most vociferous criticism of Carter's book came from American Jews like Goldberg whose lives are inextricably bound up in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

A survey of the non-mainstream U.S. press assessments of *Peace Not Apartheid* further illustrates Mearsheimer and Walt's assertion that the book did not receive a fair hearing in the mainstream press. Writing a review in Booklist, Brad Hooper, who has no apparent invested interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict, provided a strikingly different evaluation from those in the mainstream press. He praised Carter's ideas as "expressed with perfect clarity; his book, of course, represents a personal point of view, but one that is certainly grounded in both knowledge and wisdom. His outlook on the problem not only contributes to the literature of debate surrounding it but also, just as importantly,

⁴⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg. *Prisoners: A Muslim and a Jew Across the Middle East Divide* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

⁴⁸ In fact, the Israeli Committee against House Demolitions (ICAHD), a human rights group devoted to ending the occupation, threatened to boycott Amazon.com for posting Goldberg's review of *Peace Not Apartheid* without identifying him as "a citizen of Israel" who "volunteered to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces, for which he worked as a guard at a prison for Palestinian detainees." - Johnny Paul, "Israeli NGO Vows Amazon Boycott Over Carter Review," *Jerusalem Post*, 18 January 2007.

delivers a worthy game plan for clearing up the dilemma.”⁴⁹ Given the outcry over *Peace Not Apartheid* in the mainstream press, it almost seems as if Hooper is reviewing an entirely different book.

The Nation, a progressive news magazine, also ran a review of *Peace Not Apartheid* that is notable for the way it diverges from mainstream assessments of the book in the U.S. In the review, Michael F. Brown, who serves as a fellow at the Palestine Center and thus might be predisposed to praise the book, called Carter’s title “apt” and advised him to “send copies of his book to members of Congress who do not grasp the injustice of Israel’s long-running oppression of the Palestinians. They might learn a thing or two about the long-festering conflict at the heart of so many of our current troubles in the region.”⁵⁰ Despite Brown’s personal ideology, his review is still relevant precisely because there is virtually nothing like it in the mainstream U.S. press. Reading reviews of *Peace Not Apartheid* in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and other mainstream publications, it would be possible to remain completely unaware that some people considered the book worthwhile and informative. Without examining non-mainstream news sources, it would indeed be easy to conclude that people like Michael Brown do not exist.

Peace Not Apartheid also enjoyed positive reviews in some international publications, a fact that perhaps buttresses Mearsheimer and Walt’s argument about the reluctance of Americans to criticize Israel. Writing in *The Independent* of London, Robert Fisk, a newspaper correspondent and persistent critic of Israel who has been based in Beirut for more than thirty years, called the book an “honourable, honest account by a friend of

⁴⁹ Brad Hooper, “Review of *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*,” Booklist, 15 October 2006.

⁵⁰ Michael F. Brown, “Dems Rebut Carter on Israeli ‘Apartheid,’” *The Nation*, 20 November 2006.

Israel as well as the Arabs who just happens to be a fine American ex-statesman.” Fisk also reaffirmed Carter’s opinion that “Israeli lobbyists had produced among US editorial boards a ‘reluctance to criticize the Israeli government.’ ”⁵¹

Even in Israel, where criticism of Carter would have presumably been fiercest, *Peace Not Apartheid* received some notably positive reviews—at least compared with those in the mainstream U.S. press. For example, Tom Segev, a prominent Israeli historian, wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* that while he disagreed with Carter’s apartheid analogy, the “principal argument is well-founded, and backed up by the reports from B’Tselem, Peace Now, Israeli newspapers and even many articles that appear in the *New York Times* (as opposed to the theory, which Carter cites, that says Israel’s critics are being silenced).” Although Segev ultimately deemed Carter’s book a “let-down,” he argued that it “does not justify a rebuke. Not to Carter. We owe him for the peace with Egypt.”⁵²

Yossi Beilin, a former left-wing member of the Israeli Knesset, also published a generally favorable review of Carter’s book in *The Forward*, a weekly Jewish magazine based in New York City. While Beilin also disputed Carter’s use of apartheid, he “could not help but agree—however agonizingly so—with most of [the book’s] contents.” Like Segev, Beilin acknowledged the importance of Carter’s achievement at Camp David in ensuring Israel’s security: “Every Israeli, and every Jew to whom the destiny of Israel is important, is indebted to Carter for breaking the ring of hostility that had choked Israel for more than 30 years. No American president before him had dedicated himself so

⁵¹ Robert Fisk, “Banality and Barefaced Lies,” *London Independent*, 26 December 2006.

⁵² Tom Segev, “Memoir of a Great Friend,” *Haaretz*, 22 December 2006.

fully to the cause of Israel's peace and security, and, with the exception of Bill Clinton, no American president has done so since."⁵³

Beilin also contended that Israelis are generally more tolerant of criticism of Israel than Jews in the U.S., an argument he invoked to explain the two countries' contrasting reactions to the book. As Beilin emphasized:

...the threshold of what passes as acceptable here is apparently much higher than it is with Israel's friends in the United States...the harsh words that Carter reserves for Israel are simply not as jarring to Israeli ears, which have grown used to such language...what Carter says in his book about the Israeli occupation and our treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories—and perhaps no less important, how he says it—is entirely harmonious with the kind of criticism that Israelis themselves voice about their own country. There is nothing in the criticism that Carter has for Israel that has not been said by Israelis themselves.⁵⁴

Both Eleanor Clift and James Fallows have similar sentiments. Explaining the divergent press reviews of the book in the U.S. and Israel, Clift says that “I’ve been to Israel, and they [argue] about everything there. Here, people get nervous about being labeled anti-Semitic” whenever they criticize Israel.⁵⁵ Fallows makes a similar argument, saying that although he had not meticulously analyzed reviews of *Peace Not Apartheid*, he was “willing to bet this book was reviewed better in Israel than in the U.S.,” which he attributes to the “more narrow range” of opinions permitted about Israel in the U.S.⁵⁶ These statements reaffirm Mearsheimer and Walt’s contention that “the fear of being called an anti-Semite discourages many individuals from voicing reservations about Israel’s conduct or the merits of U.S. support.” In fact, the authors even singled out the

⁵³ Yossi Beilin, “Carter Is No More Critical of Israel than Israelis Themselves,” *The Forward*, 19 January 2007.

⁵⁴ Yossi Beilin, “Carter Is No More Critical of Israel than Israelis Themselves,” *The Forward*, 19 January 2007.

⁵⁵ Phone interview with Eleanor Clift, 3/17/2010.

⁵⁶ Phone interview with James Fallows, 3/15/2010.

“heated reaction” to *Peace Not Apartheid* as the “most visible case” of anti-Semitism accusations being employed as a means to suppress criticism of Israel.⁵⁷

To be sure, Carter’s book was also widely criticized in non-mainstream U.S. and international publications. In the *Jerusalem Post*, for example, Glenn Altschuler judged Carter “anything but evenhanded” and condemned him for neglecting to mention any “malicious acts by Fatah, Hamas or Hizbullah.”⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the aforementioned reviews demonstrate that the reaction to *Peace Not Apartheid* was not universally negative. Many publications—even some in Israel—applauded Carter for boldly publicizing his views on a controversial issue. According to these publications, he had merely ignited a debate about the Israeli occupation, which, after all, was the stated intention of the book.

And yet the damage had been done. In the months after *Peace Not Apartheid* was published, Carter continued to write a number of opinion pieces in major newspapers that were intended to defuse the controversy and rebuff accusations that he was anti-Israel or anti-Semitic. Carter was clearly beginning to realize the anger his book had caused, and he knew this resentment might have serious consequences for his reputation. At the same time, Carter was certainly not apologizing. One opinion piece summarized his “major points,” which included a discussion of how Palestinians “have been severely dominated and oppressed,” living in a society of “forced segregation,” with the separation wall being “obviously designed to acquire more territory and protect Israeli colonies already built.”⁵⁹ He then attacked those critics who made “ad hominem statements, alleging that I am a

⁵⁷ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt. *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 191-3.

⁵⁸ Glenn C. Altschuler, “Indicting Israel,” *Jerusalem Post*, 22 December 2006, 25.

⁵⁹ Jimmy Carter, “Reiterating the Keys to Peace,” *Boston Globe*, 20 December 2006, A11.

liar, plagiarist, anti-Semite, racist, bigot, ignorant, etc.” Carter also published an opinion article a month later claiming that the book’s “basic proposals” had been obscured by all the controversy. He wrote that his book merely suggests “that peace talks be resumed after six years of delay and that the tragic persecution of Palestinians be ended.” Carter also stressed that Israel was preventing Palestinians in the occupied territories from enjoying their fundamental rights. Again, he was not exactly apologizing, but trying to reframe the debate in a way that focused more on his policy solutions than on the title of the book.

In addition to writing opinion pieces, Carter took other steps to mitigate the criticism of himself and the book. He released a “Letter to Jewish Citizens of America” on the Carter Center website in mid-December 2006 specifying what he meant by apartheid and reassuring American Jews of his unwavering support for Israel and condemnation of all forms of terrorism.⁶⁰ Carter also participated in a forum about *Peace Not Apartheid* at Brandeis University on January 23, 2007. During this event, he gave a presentation and then answered prescreened questions from students and faculty. Carter had at first declined the invitation because Brandeis wanted him to debate the Harvard law professor Alan M. Dershowitz, who had publicly challenged Carter on his views in several opinion articles. Eventually, Brandeis acquiesced in Carter’s wishes and barred Dershowitz from the event, though the university permitted him to issue a response after Carter’s presentation.

The forum at Brandeis served as Carter’s first major speech after the book’s publication, and while he apologized for possibly offending anyone, he reiterated his

⁶⁰ Jimmy Carter, “A Letter to Jewish Citizens of America,” *The Carter Center*, 15 December 2006, http://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/carter_letter_121506.html (accessed February 27, 2010).

belief that apartheid accurately described the situation in occupied Palestine, but not in Israel proper.⁶¹ He decried the occupation's "oppression" as "contrary to the tenets of the Jewish religious faith and contrary to the basic principles of the state of Israel." Carter did, however, express regret for one of the book's sentences, since revised, that seemed to legitimize Palestinian suicide bombings as a response to Israel's failure to adhere to the 2003 Roadmap for Peace.⁶² Still, this was not what those deeply offended by the book were expecting. Rather than concede that he was wrong to use the word apartheid, Carter simply reaffirmed his views that the occupied Palestinians were indeed suffering under a system of apartheid, which was "grounded not in racism [as it was in South Africa], but in a religion-based desire to control land."⁶³ It was stubborn Jimmy Carter all over again: unyielding, self-righteous, and relentlessly driven to help those he perceived as oppressed, regardless of the consequences for his public image. He wrote the book to be provocative and rejuvenate a debate about the Middle East peace process. In this respect, at least, Carter proved successful.

Since the publication of *Peace Not Apartheid*, Carter has published two other books about humanitarian issues, neither of which has generated comparable attention or controversy. What the reviews of these books make clear, however, is that the provocations of *Peace Not Apartheid* remain on people's minds. For example, writing about the first book, *Beyond the White House: Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope*, which was published in 2007, David Greenberg discussed the two Jimmy Carters that "have long coexisted in the public mind." There was "Good Jimmy," who "mounted

⁶¹ Pam Belluck, "At Brandeis, Carter Responds to Critics," *New York Times*, 24 January 2007, A11.

⁶² Michael Powell, "Jimmy Carter's 'Peace' Mission to Brandeis," *Washington Post*, 24 January 2007, C1.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

a comeback to make even Richard Nixon envious” and “slowly hammered out a new, refurbished image as a humanitarian.” Then there was “Bad Jimmy,” who “gathered the kindling of Good Jimmy’s name, doused it with the gasoline of Middle East politics and ignited it all with the spark of his long-simmering animosity toward Israel. After the publication of *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*... Good Jimmy’s hard work lay in ashes.”⁶⁴

Gershom Gorenberg’s review of Carter’s book from early 2009, *We Can Have Peace in the Holy Land: A Plan That Will Work*, was more subdued, but it nonetheless observed that Carter “has an easier time talking about Israeli obstacles to peace than Palestinian ones.”⁶⁵ These reviews illuminate the fact that *Peace Not Apartheid* still taints people’s perceptions of Carter and his views on the Middle East. At least for the time being, the book has negatively affected the way the former president is portrayed in the news media.

To this day, Carter is continually confronted with accusations, especially among American Jews, that he harbors anti-Israel views and uncritically supports the Palestinians. As recently as December 2009, he published a letter apologizing to members of the Jewish community for any of his actions that may have offended them:

We must recognize Israel’s achievements under difficult circumstances, even as we strive in a positive way to help Israel continue to improve its relations with its Arab populations, but we must not permit criticisms for improvement to stigmatize Israel. As I would have noted at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but which is appropriate at any time of the year, I offer an Al Het for any words or deeds of mine that may have done so.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ David Greenberg, “Good Jimmy, Bad Jimmy,” *Washington Post*, 14 October 2007, BW6.

⁶⁵ Gershom Gorenberg, “In Praise of Diplomacy,” *New York Times*, 15 February 2009, BR8.

⁶⁶ Ron Kampeas, “Carter Offers Jewish Community ‘Al-Het,’” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 21 December 2009, <http://www.jta.org/news/article/2009/12/21/1009832/carter-offers-jewish-community-al-het> (accessed February 27, 2010).

Although some people speculated that Carter's apology was related to his grandson Jason's race for the Georgia Senate, Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, accepted the apology and called it a "good start."⁶⁷

Carter's public apology demonstrates the extent to which the publication of *Peace Not Apartheid* has damaged his image as a noble humanitarian activist; the apology also serves as a striking indication that Carter is cognizant of this damage. Indeed, the book has permanently tarnished his status as someone who can facilitate the Middle East peace process, a staggering loss of credibility for a man whose presidential legacy remains the Camp David Accords he brokered between Israel and Egypt. In publishing the book, Carter alienated many journalists, and he consequently suffered an irreparable blow in his portrayal in the news media. After enjoying considerable positive news coverage in the early- and mid-1990s, Carter has since experienced a steady erosion of support among members of the media, with *Peace Not Apartheid* precipitating a sustained period of negative coverage for the former president. Indeed, the book serves as the most recent example of Carter's increasingly strident rhetoric about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Compared with his more than twenty years of diplomatic and humanitarian work, Carter's writing had always been a peripheral pursuit. Ironically, it was a single book that seriously damaged his reputation in the press.

⁶⁷ Greg Bluestein, "Jimmy Carter Apologizes to Jews In Open Letter," *HuffingtonPost.com*, 23 December 2009, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/12/23/jimmy-carter-apologizes-t_n_402368.html (accessed February 27, 2010).

Conclusion: A Word From President Carter

At the outset of this project, I had hoped to speak with Carter himself about his relationship with the news media. After all, hypothesizing about this relationship was one thing, but talking with Carter would be quite another. I was fortunate enough to be studying an American president who is still living, and I naturally wanted to take advantage of this unique opportunity. In the fall of 2009, I put this request to Steven Hochman, who said that while Carter would not be available for an interview, I could submit one question for him to answer via e-mail. In my question, I asked Carter if he thought any aspects of his character or motives have been consistently misrepresented or distorted by journalists. About a week before my thesis was due, I received an e-mail from Hochman that included Carter's response:

I don't believe that I have been consistently misrepresented by journalists. Over the years, particularly since 1981, I believe most journalists have fairly reported the news about me. In fact, most of the coverage of me has been very favorable. I have been pleased by the portrayal of my work with The Carter Center, Habitat for Humanity, and other organizations.

At times, I have spoken out or written about some very controversial issues. When that has happened the media has covered both my position and the position of people who have disagreed with me. Some of those people have misrepresented my motivations and what I said or did. I have been disappointed, hurt, and even angered by some of the comments I have read. Nevertheless, these stories that included unfavorable comments about me also have given considerable attention to the perspective that I was advocating. I benefit from and am thankful for the free American press.

Jimmy Carter

Anodyne though it is, Carter's statement reminded me of several themes that animate my thesis. First, and on a lighter note, I found it amusing that he disagreed entirely with

the premise of my question. Throughout the course of my research, I read—and heard in my interviews—time and again of Carter’s stubborn and uncompromising conviction in his own rightness. It seemed fitting, therefore, for him to argue that my question was grounded in a fallacy. Inured to reading these exchanges between Carter and reporters—where he disagrees completely with the question posed—I had the opportunity to engage in such an exchange. This put me, albeit just briefly, in the reporter’s position of trying to solicit Carter’s opinion on his image in the media. Considering the subject of my thesis is Carter’s relationship with the press, this was an invaluable experience for me. I was able to participate in an exchange with Carter, thereby gaining a limited understanding of his approach to answering questions posed by the press.

After reading Carter’s statement, I also noticed an intriguing incongruity between one of his lines and a comment from Elizabeth Kurylo. Carter ends his note with “I benefit from and am thankful for the free American press.” In contrast, Kurylo, interviewed two months prior to Carter, argues that “He believes in a free press, but when it’s applied to him, he’s incredibly thin-skinned...If you cross him [as she had, in an episode described to me] he’s a different person...He’ll remember every slight, every criticism. It’s almost as if he holds a grudge.”¹ While I do not doubt the sincerity of Carter’s comment, the discord between these two statements suggests that, if he is in fact “crossed,” Carter can become an entirely different person. Indeed, during the outcry after *Peace Not Apartheid* was published, Carter, rather than being “thankful” for the press, seemed annoyed, frustrated, and saddened by the personal attacks on his character printed in many newspapers and magazines.

¹ Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/15/10.

Of course, every American president must deal with the gratuitously personal (and hurtful) criticism that is often the product of a free press. But because Carter is such a proud and righteous man, he has proved considerably less successful in handling these attacks than many other prominent public figures. Simply put, Carter does not easily disregard criticism of his character. At the same time, he has never cared enough about the press to cultivate the relationships with reporters that militate against such criticism. As Kurylo notes, referring to Carter's presidency, "He didn't play the game. You sit down and have editorial meetings with the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. He wasn't willing to do what it took to establish a few personal relationships."² In recent years, Carter has become more adroit in dealing with the press, but he still lacks a fundamental understanding of how to ingratiate himself with reporters and editors. The problem here, however, is that Carter also lacks a *desire* to win these people over. As previously noted, his personality does not "naturally lend itself to his going to have a stiff drink with a columnist after work."³ For Carter, the press has only ever mattered insofar as it provides him an opportunity to elucidate his views. Otherwise, the news media is simply a nettlesome obstacle to progress.

In his message to me, Carter also makes the curious remark that even the negative press coverage of him has "given considerable *attention* to the perspective that I was advocating" (italics mine). This comment is strikingly consistent with reporters' arguments that Carter yearns for the attention inevitably following the publication of a provocative book or speech. For example, Eleanor Clift thinks that Carter deliberately used "apartheid" in his book in order to cause a stir and attract attention to the stalled

² Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/13/10.

³ Interview with Rex Granum in Washington, D.C., 3/2/10.

Middle East peace talks. She argues that he was “willing to take the hit,” but that the damage to his reputation was perhaps more severe than he had anticipated.⁴ Elizabeth Kurylo similarly observes that Carter published *Peace Not Apartheid* in order to draw attention to himself and to the Arab-Israeli conflict—even if that meant alienating some people.⁵ In this way, Carter still stands behind his provocative book, because even the negative press coverage of it has focused attention on what he perceives as a human rights crisis.

And yet it is difficult not to question whether publishing *Peace Not Apartheid* was worth the damage it inflicted on Carter’s reputation in the press. After enjoying twenty-five years of largely positive news coverage, Carter published a single book that has severely tarnished his image in the news media. In our interview, I asked Fallows where the controversy over *Peace Not Apartheid* would be played in Carter’s obituary—would it be in the first paragraph, or buried somewhere near the bottom on page 18? “I would hope that the leading comment on his role in the Middle East would be Camp David,” he says. “It would be an unwholesome sign for America if [the book controversy] were the most significant part of his legacy.”⁶

Speculating on the ramifications of *Peace Not Apartheid* for Carter’s legacy would be just that: speculation. At the present moment, however, his reputation in the press is at its lowest since he left office. In this respect, the news media coverage of Carter has come full circle: from negative to positive to negative once again. But this time, unlike in

⁴ Phone interview with Eleanor Clift, 3/17/10.

⁵ Phone interview with Elizabeth Kurylo, 1/13/10.

⁶ Phone interview with James Fallows, 3/15/10.

1981, resurrecting his image in the press might require more than doing honorable work as a global humanitarian activist.

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Considering my thesis deals primarily with the press coverage of Jimmy Carter, most of my sources are newspaper or magazine stories from the following publications:

New York Times

Washington Post

Wall Street Journal

Time

Newsweek

U.S. News and World Report

Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Columbus Ledger-Enquirer

Americus Times-Recorder

The articles from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* were accessed using either LexisNexis Academic or ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Articles from the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Columbus Ledger-Enquirer*, and *Americus Times Recorder* were retrieved through Access World News; however, articles from these three publications dated before 1985 were found on microfilm. *Time* has a fully searchable archive on its website.

All articles were accessed between February 2009 and March 2010.