

Interview With The Former President Of The United States: Jimmy Carter

Written by Kam Williams

Monday, 22 November 2010 20:54



Jimmy Carter, the 39th President of the United States, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002. He and his wife of 64 years, Rosalynn Carter, still make their home in their birthplace, Plains, Georgia, a predominantly African-American town with a population of just 637. However, the inseparable, peripatetic couple continues to travel around the world together on behalf causes advancing peace, healthcare and a number of other humanitarian concerns.

Former President Carter is also a very prolific writer, and the author of over two dozen books. Here, he discusses his latest best-seller, *White House Diary*, an annotated version of the private journal he kept during his tenure in office. *Interview conducted by the columnist Kam Williams, J.D.*

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KAM WILLIAMS TALKS TO THE FORMER PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER:

Jimmy Carter: Hi Kam [Williams] , good morning.

Kam Williams: President Carter. Thanks for the time. I'm honored to have this opportunity.

JC: It's my pleasure. I've been looking forward to this.

KW: The first time we were supposed to speak, the interview was cancelled because you fell ill and had to be rushed to the hospital. How are you feeling now?

JC: I'm getting along fine. I was just sick for one day, but it got a lot of publicity.

KW: And how's Rosalynn Carter and the rest of the family?

JC: Oh, everybody's fine, thanks, and the family's growing rapidly.

KW: I actually got to shake your hand at a campaign rally in Newark, New Jersey in 1980. So, when I started to read White House Diary, the first thing I did was to look at your journal entry for that day to see whether you mentioned receiving words of encouragement from a bright, young black man with red hair and freckles who stood out in the crowd and made a lasting impression on you. But no such luck.

JC: [Laughs] Well, thank you for coming out. I appreciate that very much.

KW: When I told my readers I'd be speaking with you, I received an avalanche of questions to ask . More than I've ever received before.

JC: Really? Then, let's get going and I'll try to answer all of them.

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KW: Yale grad Tommy Russell says: You have been on missions to North Korea and to Palestine to visit the leaders of countries that traditional politicians and philosophers shun as unpalatable or useless to negotiate with, and have discovered that negotiation is possible. What would you say is the biggest lesson you've learned from meeting with these leaders that others consider to be on the fringe?

JC: Well, first of all, it's important to meet with the people who can shape future events, and who might be causing a current problem. And to ignore them means that the problem will continue. Secondly, I've found that they really appreciate it when someone who is responsible will meet with them, and they really go out of their way to try to be accommodating. On both of my major trips to North Korea, the leaders of the country made it plain that they want to make progress towards doing away with nuclear weapons and towards ending the longstanding, official state of war which persists between North Korea and the United States and South Korea, a war which has continued since the ceasefire over fifty years ago. That sort of thing happens quite often when we meet with people who are kind of international outcasts with whom the government of the United States won't meet. So, when I get back home, I always give a thorough report to the President and Secretary of State to make sure that they know what the possibilities are.

KW: Tommy [Russell] also has a much less serious query: Having started out as a peanut farmer, do you love a good peanut butter and jelly sandwich?

JC: [Chuckles] Absolutely, Tommy! We have them quite often in our home. And I think our grandchildren like them even more than we do.

KW: PJ Lorenz asks: Of your many accomplishments, which one is the most meaningful to you?

JC: I think maybe the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt which ended a long series of very challenging wars threatening the very existence of Israel. That would be one. Another that comes to mind right offhand is the peace treaty turning control of the Panama Canal over to Panamanians. The profitability and effectiveness of the Canal is now five times as great as when the United States was in charge of it.

KW: Attorney Bernadette Beekman asks: What do you think of the housing crisis here in America today, given the escalating number of foreclosures and your work with Habitat for Humanity?

JC: It just shows the desperate need and desire of people for homes. But it is also evidence of the greed of those banks which made loans knowing that borrowers wouldn't be able to repay. The lenders then sold the bad mortgages to unsuspecting investors so that by the time the foreclosures transpired they caused a great deal of distress to all the folks who had been taken

advantage of.

KW: Bernadette [Beekman] was also wondering whether you think it will be possible to end the Cuban boycott in the near future given the current political climate.

JC: I hope so. I tried to do it thirty years ago, when I was President. We established diplomatic relations with Cuba to the extent that we have an “Intersection” in Havana for the United States’ diplomats, and one in Washington for Cuban diplomats. So, I believe that the boycott that we have against Cuba is counterproductive, and it also makes the twelve million or so Cuban people suffer unnecessarily just because of a foolish policy of the United States.

KW: Bernadette’s final question is: Have you perceived that race relations have been affected positively by the election of Barack Obama?

JC: I’m afraid not. The election of Barack Obama was a very wonderful step forward for the country, which has unfortunately been tainted by the ugly reaction of some right wing activist who are doing their best to cast aspersions on his character and to question his religion and citizenship.

KW: Jimmy Bayan says: The Iran Hostage Crisis lasted 444 days. In hindsight, is there anything you would have done differently that may have ended it sooner?

JC: I would have sent one more helicopter, which would have meant that we could have brought out all the hostages and also the rescue team. We had an unexpected failure of three of our eight helicopters on that rescue attempt in 1980, so we didn’t have enough to get everyone out.

KW: Jimmy [Bayan] also asks, what is your assessment of the current Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad? Do you feel that he’s laughing at us?

JC: Ahmadinejad is just a buffoon, sort of a clown on the international scene who tries to be provocative so he can get his name in the paper and his face on television.

KW: Editor [of Mega Diversities]/Legist Patricia Turnier observes that you’ve been recognized for your lifelong commitment to human rights. She asks: What did it mean to you to win the Nobel Peace Prize?

JC: It was a great honor for me, and for the Carter Center, which has concentrated its efforts on alleviating suffering among the poorest people in the world afflicted with disease, particularly those from thirty-five nations in Africa. So, it was a great tribute to the great work of the Carter Center.

KW: Patricia [Turnier] adds that you and the late Dr. Martin Luther King are the only two native Georgians to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, and you are the only U.S President to receive the Martin Luther King Nonviolent Peace Prize. And in 2006, you gave a eulogy at the funeral of Coretta Scott King. What did that mean to you?

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JC: The King family and I were very close. They gave me their full support when I ran for President, and when I was in the White House, Coretta and Daddy King would come by quite often to give me advice about what I could do to help African-Americans and the poor.

KW: Hisani Dubose says: Thank you for remaining true to the things you believe in. That's in short supply these days. How do you finance your great humanitarian work?

JC: Well, we have about a quarter-million contributors who make modest donations every year to the Carter Center, and we get some large ones as well. So, we are always looking for private donors who believe in what we're doing to make sure that we have the funds available to carry out our programs.

KW: David "Mr. B" Barradale asks: Do you think about how much less dependent on fossil fuels we would be if you had been reelected in 1980?

JC: [Chuckles] I think about that often, as a matter of fact. While I was in office, we were able to cut down the imports of oil from foreign countries by 50%, from about eight to just four million barrels a day. Now that figure's up to twelve million. So, yes, David, I often think about how much better off we'd be.

KW: Leisa Hinds-Simpson says: Given the lower than expected popularity rating for President Obama, what strategy do you propose to increase the ratings and to get a feeling of confidence back on track in the Obama administration?

JC: I believe his popularity's going to increase over the next two years as he comes out swinging after the Republicans take charge of the House of Representatives. I think he's going to be much more of a fighter in taking his case directly to the people than he has been.

KW: FSU grad Laz Lyles asks, how would you want those of us who weren't yet born during your administration to think of your tenure as president?

JC: I would say two things: One would be human rights, which we've already covered. The other would be peace. We not only brought peace to many countries and people around the world, but we never dropped a bomb, we never launched a missile, and we never fired a bullet while I was in office. Yet we protected the interests of the American people in a peaceful, but strong way.

KW: Lester Chisholm says: Knowing what you know about the world's current state of affairs, with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight, how would you have led this country differently when you were president?

JC: I think I would have been much more attuned to the concerns of people who were desperately in need. I was unfamiliar, for instance, with the plight of those living in the small villages in the deserts and the jungles of Africa. Now, every day, the Carter Center works

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among those people in a very exciting, fruitful and gratifying way. That's definitely one of the things I wish had been aware of when I was in the White House.

KW: Larry Greenberg recalls that in 1978, you declared a federal emergency at Love Canal. He asks: How would you characterize progress in our nation's management of toxic materials since then?

JC: [Chuckles] We passed the Superfund Act the last few months I was in office, which finally made it possible to fine the large corporations which were polluting our streams, our soil and our air, and to make them pay for the cleanup. I'm proud of passing those laws, but I would just hope that Congress and incumbent Presidents will continue to enforce them.

KW: Rudy Lewis says: Many African nations are celebrating a half-century of independence. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about those countries' ability to deal with matters of poverty and self-governance?

JC: Rudy, the Carter Center spends every day in Africa, and I go over several times a year. We have helped conduct many elections there, for example, in Ghana, just recently, which had a wonderful election process. We also did the election in Liberia when the only African female president [Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf] was elected. So, I've witnessed a very strong move towards democracy since leaving the White House. But unfortunately, some of the African leaders employ various nefarious means to remain in office far beyond what their constitutions permit. I'd say it's a mixed bag, but in general the 53 countries on the continent of Africa have made great progress towards freedom and democracy, and in terms of electing good, sound administrations.

KW: Rudy [Lewis] also says: You have made progressive statements about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Do you think that the parties will sign a meaningful peace agreement on the proposed Two-State Solution within the next five years?

JC: They will, if Israel would agree to withdraw from the occupied territories. I don't think there's going to be peace as long as Israel is occupying land that belongs to the Palestinians, to Lebanon and to Syria. So, that's a decision that Israel will have to make.

KW: Wesley Derbyshire says: I have always appreciated your diplomatic strength. If you were still in office, how would you handle getting us out of this expensive war in Afghanistan?

JC: I'd get us out as soon as possible. We know definitively that Al-Qaida isn't all over Afghanistan anymore. According to CIA estimates, there are less than a hundred Al-Qaida members in the entire country. Most of them are in Pakistan. So, it's hard for me to understand why we're still fighting there and sending in more and more troops. I would get out of Afghanistan as quickly as possible.

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KW: Howard Harris asks: Was being President worth it?

JC: It was. For one thing, I enjoyed being President. Secondly, I believe we accomplished a lot of good things while I was in office. We maintained a very good working relationship with both Republicans and Democrats during my tenure. Consequently, we had a very high batting average in dealing with Congress on some very controversial issues. Plus, we kept our nation at peace, we obeyed the law, and we told the truth.

KW: Harriet Pakula Teweles says: Despite the tremendous accomplishments of your presidency and post-presidency, some people still reflect on the candor of your *Playboy* interview admissions about having "lust in your heart." If you were to do a *Playboy* interview today, would you be as forthcoming?

JC: No, I don't think I would. I was a little bit naïve back in those days. All I did was quote a Bible verse from the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus said that people who have lust in their heart as just as guilty as those who commit adultery. But that landed me in serious trouble. As a matter of fact, that almost cost me the election. By the way, it was the best-selling *Playboy* issue in history.

KW: Children's book author Irene Smalls asks: What is the most critical issue facing America today?

JC: I'd say the growing chasm between rich people and poor people not only in this country but all around the world. That difference between the rich and poor is growing every month. Giving people equal access to enjoying the benefits of this great country is the biggest problem that we're not making any progress in resolving.

KW: Irene [Small] is also curious about whether you might like to be President again.

JC: No, I'm 86, and too old to be President. Moreover, when I ran, I didn't have any money. Now, it requires raising hundreds of millions of dollars just to get the nomination, and I don't care to be involved in that process.

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

JC: [Laughs] No, I can't think of any, you've just gone through had an excellent string of them which I've enjoyed tackling.

KW: The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

JC: Not really. I have a great deal of confidence in myself and in my faith. As far as being in dangerous situations around the world is concerned, I always have a Secret Service detail with me as one of the privileges of a former President. So, the answer is "No."

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

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JC: Absolutely

KW: The Teri Emerson question: When was the last time you had a good laugh?

JC: Last night.

KW: Leon Marquis asks: What is your guiltiest pleasure?

JC: I have a lot of pleasures but I don't feel guilty about them. One of my greatest pleasures is being on the farmland that's been in the family since 1833. I enjoy walking by myself on the same paths where, as a little boy, I delighted in following my father around. I don't feel guilty about it, but that's one I don't care to share with anyone else.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

JC: Right now I'm reading Washington Rules, a book which points out the serious problem which America faces because we are constantly involved in unnecessary wars.

KW: The music maven Heather Covington question: What music do you like to listen to?

JC: I listen to Willie Nelson pretty regularly on my iPod.

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

JC: I'm an expert cook when it comes to preparing the quail, ducks, geese and wild turkeys that I hunt on the farm.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

JC: I see a person who's getting older every year.

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

JC: Peace for Israel and for Israel's neighbors.

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

JC: Moving into a new house, when I was four year's-old. The front door was locked and we didn't have a key, so my daddy let me climb through the window to open the door.

KW: The Rudy Lewis question: Who's at the top of your hero list?

JC: Among Presidents, I'd say Harry Truman, because he was courageous enough to command that racial segregation be ended in the military. I was serving in a submarine in the

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U.S. Navy at the time he issued the order.

KW: What advice do you have for anyone who wants to follow in your footsteps?

JC: Always tell the truth, and take an interest in serving the people around you as much as possible.

KW: The Tavis Smiley questions. First, how introspective are you?

JC: I'm much more introspective than I was, say, thirty years ago. When I reflect upon my blessings during my very nice lifetime, I am inspired to make sure that I spend the balance of the days of my existence in a productive way.

KW: Secondly, how do you want to be remembered?

JC: I'd like to be remembered as someone who was a champion of peace and human rights.

KW: Well, thanks again for the time, President Carter. And I really appreciate your addressing each question seriously.

JC: Thank you, Kam [Williams] . I've really enjoyed speaking with you.

About the author of this article: Kam Williams is a syndicated film and book critic who writes for 100+ publications around the U.S., Europe, Asia, Africa, Canada, and the Caribbean. He is a member of the New York Film Critics Online, the NAACP Image Awards Nominating Committee, and Rotten Tomatoes. He is a contributor to TheLoop21.com, eurweb.com and so on. He is also a columnist for

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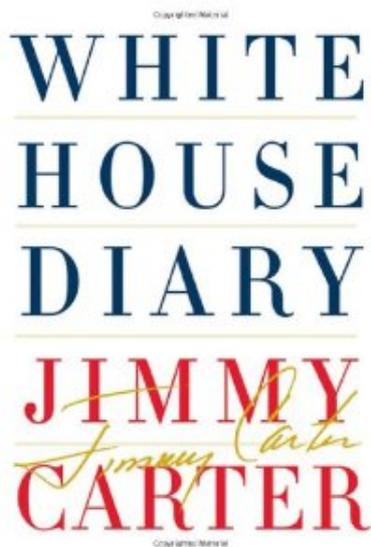
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. Some of Kam Williams' articles are translated into Chinese. In 2008, he was Voted Most Outstanding Journalist of the Decade by the Disilgold Soul Literary Review. Williams is an erudite Attorney who holds a BA in Black Studies from Cornell University, an MA in English from Brown University, an M.B.A. from The Wharton School, and a J.D. from Boston University. Kam Williams is a member of the Bar in NJ, NY, CT, PA, MA & US Supreme Court bars. He lives in Princeton, (New Jersey) with his wife and son. Kam Williams can be reached at

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An Excerpt from Jimmy Carter's new book *White House Diary*:



“During my four years in the White House, I kept a personal diary by dictating my thoughts and observations several times each day... When dictating entries to my diary... I intertwined my personal opinions and activities with a brief description of the official duties I performed. Readers should remember that I seldom exercised any restraint on what I dictated, because I did not contemplate the more personal entries ever being made public... Despite a temptation to conceal my errors, misjudgments of people, or lack of foresight, I decided when preparing this book not to revise the original transcript...”

Throughout this book, I wrote explanatory notes to help the reader understand the context of the entries, bring to life the duties of a president, offer insights into a number of the people I worked with, and point out how many of the important challenges remain the same... In presenting this annotated diary, my intention is not to defend or excuse my own actions or to criticize others, but simply to provide, based on current knowledge, an objective analysis.”

-- Excerpted from the Preface (pgs. xiii-xv)

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White House Diary

by President Jimmy Carter

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Hardcover, \$30.00

612 pages, Illustrated

ISBN: 978-0-374-28099-4

To order a copy of White House Diary, visit: amazon.com or .ca

Some other books of Jimmy Carter:

We Can Have Peace in the Holy Land: A Plan That Will Work, by Jimmy Carter, Kindle ed., 2009, 256 p.

Beyond the White House: Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope, by Jimmy Carter, Publisher: Simon & Schuster, 2008, 288 p.

A Remarkable Mother, by Jimmy Carter, Publisher: Simon & Schuster, 2008, 240 p.

Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid by Jimmy Carter, Kindle ed., 2007, 288 p.

Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis by Jimmy Carter, Kindle ed., 2006, 224 p.

The Personal Beliefs of Jimmy Carter: Winner of the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize, by Jimmy Carter, Three Rivers Press, 2002, 560 p.

An Hour Before Daylight: Memoirs of a Rural Boyhood by Jimmy Carter, Kindle ed., 2001, 288 p.

Living Faith, by Jimmy Carter, Three Rivers Press, 1998, 288 p.

Keeping Faith, by Jimmy Carter, University of Arkansas Press, 1995, 640 p.

The Virtues of Aging, by Jimmy Carter, Ballentine Books, 1998, 160 p.

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