

An American President I Truly Admired

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America's 39th President, James Earl Carter, Jr., popularly known as Jimmy Carter died at his residence in Plains, Georgia on 29 December 2024 at the age of 100. He was the longest living U.S. president. He was born on 1 October 1924 in Plains, Georgia to James Earl Carter, Sr., and Bessie Lilian Gordy Carter, popularly known as Lilian Carter.

President Carter was one-term president from 20 January 1977 to 20 January 1981. He was Georgia's governor for four years from 1971 to 1975. Outside those years, he was a private citizen and maintained his primary residence in Plains, Georgia. He spent, however, eleven years as naval officer. I cannot write anything on President Carter that has probably not been written already somewhere or other. However, I have a couple of fond memories of him that I want to share.

The day President Carter was inaugurated at the U.S. Capitol, I was working at an office in Washington D.C. just two blocks from Pennsylvania Avenue and a short walking distance from the U.S. Capitol building where the inauguration ceremony was taking place. Traditionally, Presidents, after taking oath of the office and attending an inaugural luncheon at the U.S. Capitol drove down the Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House. However, Mr Carter requested that the traditional Inaugural luncheon event hosted by the Joint Congressional Committee be cancelled. He also decided to walk along with his wife,

Rosalynn Carter and their eight-year-old daughter Amy, all the way from the Capitol building to the White House. This was the first time a newly elected president did so after taking the oath of the office. Since that time, all U.S. subsequent presidents walked at least part of the approximately two-mile route.

The news of President Carter walking down the Pennsylvania Avenue after inauguration quickly spread in our office. Hearing the news, my friend Charles and I wasted no time leaving the office hurriedly to stand by the roadside with the rest of the crowd to get a glimpse of the newly elect President and his family.

Almost every day, Charles and I spent part of our lunch break visiting various museums and art galleries in the National Mall. That was an exciting area in D.C. to roam around. I remember climbing the Washington Monument one day using the stairway. I mention Charles because one day, while walking around the U.S. Capitol building, he asked me if I would like to get a haircut. The question surprised me a great deal as there was no barber shop anywhere near that area and I didn't think either of us needed a haircut badly. Charles took me to a barbershop inside the Capitol building, where all the senators and congressmen got their haircut and their shoes polished. It was a large room with all four walls covered with large poster size pictures of notable former senators and congressmen getting their haircuts. Charles assured me that we would

have no problem getting our haircuts there. According to him, it was, after all, a public building. Charles knew all these intricate details because his wife was an aide to one of the congressmen from his home state, which he didn't announce before. In any case, we got our haircut for only 75 cents each. Quite a deal, even in those days.

By all accounts, Carter's presidency was not a successful one. It was beset by a bad economy. Additionally, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, seizure of American hostages from the U.S. embassy in Iran, and a disastrous military failure to rescue those hostages cost him the re-election. Regardless, I always admired him as a noble and principled man, the values he preached, and the examples he set during and after his presidency. His major achievement, while in office, was the Camp David peace agreement between the Arabs and the Israelis.

Jimmy Carter, however, gained all the respect and admiration for the contributions he made after his presidency. In a television interview on his seventieth birthday, ABC's Barbara Walters asked, 'Mr. President, looking back on your time as a Submarine Officer, a farmer and businessman, as governor, and in Washington, what has been the best of all?' President Carter replied, 'By far, my best years are those I'm enjoying now, since Rosalynn and I left the White House.' In fact, Jimmy Carter's post-presidency is widely considered most respectful in U.S. history. The work Jimmy Carter did, for which he will be remembered in history, is for his work through the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia.

The first presidential library was built for Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941 in Hyde Park, New York, while he was still president. The Jimmy Carter Library and Museum along with the Carter Center were

both dedicated in October 1986. The Carter Center, a non-governmental organization, was founded in 1982 in partnership with Emory University, whereas, the Library and the Museum are administered by the National Archives. The Carter Center's main objectives are to advance human rights and alleviate human sufferings by resolving conflicts, promoting democracy and human rights, preventing diseases and improving healthcare, particularly, in poor countries. The activities of the Carter Center earned him the world fame, universal respect, and a Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

In 2003, our daughter, Monica, joined Emory University for her undergraduate studies, while I was on an assignment in Saudi Arabia and spent a number of years over there with my wife. A year later, we bought a condominium within a short distance from the university for her to stay and also for us to spend some time during our vacation from work. Soon we discovered that we were also within a short walking distance from the Carter Center and the Presidential Library. This was one of the nicest areas in Atlanta, called the Druid Hills. The neighbourhood is historically significant for its well-preserved 20th century landscape architecture and suburban developments by Frederick Law Olmsted. He was considered to be the father of landscape architecture in America.

Monica's next-door neighbours were two retired professors from Georgia Institute of Technology, popularly known as Georgia Tech. The husband, Anton, was a professor of chemical engineering and his wife, Helen, a professor of comparative literature. They treated Monica affectionately and soon we became friendly with them. Every day, they went out for lunch and Helen would knock on our door to ask if we would like to join them. We did

join them a few times and noticed a rather routine habit. They would go to the same restaurant every day, order the same food, consisting of fresh fruits, salads and a large portion of cottage cheese, eat exactly half of what they ordered, and bring the rest home for supper in the evening. Helen was fond of telling stories and one day, she revealed that our unit and theirs, which shared a common wall, were Jimmy Carter's campaign headquarter in Atlanta when he ran for president in 1976. I was pleasantly surprised and delighted to know that we were living in a rather historical place. Anton suffered a stroke and was a man of a few words. However, one day, he suggested that we visit the Carter Presidential Library, if we hadn't done so already.

One morning, I decided to walk over to the Carter Presidential Library. When I arrived there, I noticed two entrances, side by side, with no signage indicating which door led to the library. There was no security guard or any booth for entrance fees. There was no one around to ask. Perhaps, it was too early for any visitors. I decided to enter the door on the left. Moments later, I found myself in the middle of a large well-lighted and beautifully decorated room with chandeliers, and sofas scattered around, but not a single person in sight. I felt I was in a wrong place, but kept on walking. A short distance away, I found myself in front of an office. I had a quick glance inside the office and noticed a man at a large desk with his head down, as if, concentrating on some reading materials. There was a woman outside the office sitting at a desk, whom I hadn't noticed earlier. As soon as she saw me, she raised both hands, as if in panic, and signalled me to stop right there. She came running at me and wanted to know where I was heading. When I mentioned that, she reminded me in

a whispering voice that I was in a wrong place and it was Mr Carter's private office. She understood that I made a mistake and graciously offered to escort me to the library area, which was in a different area of the building. Frankly, if I made such grave error at the present time, I would perhaps be shot by any security personnel before asking any question.

'How often President Carter comes to this office?' I asked the woman.

'On the average, once a month,' she replied.

'Why is he in the office today?'

'A family is donating their Estate to the Carter Center and he is here to accept that donation.' She continued, 'If you hang around in the library for a while, you will be able to see him.' President Carter was living in Plains, which is about 160 miles from Atlanta.

The Library was rather plain compared to other presidential libraries I visited later, but quite impressive with pictures, videos and documents, and numerous other memorabilia of his presidency, like all other presidential libraries are. It appeared more like a research centre as I saw a number of people studying various documents. A short time later, I, along with all other visitors, gathered against a large floor-to-ceiling glass window to watch the brief ceremony in the yard, where Mr Carter accepted the donation. That was the second time I saw him after the inauguration day in 1977.

When Jimmy Carter left the White House in 1981, and returned to his home in Plains, he found himself in serious financial trouble. The peanut farm that he inherited when his father passed away in 1953, which was once the financial backbone of the family, was in serious financial debt. When Carter became president, he put the business in a blind-trust and it was managed by a law

firm in Georgia. Carter sold the business to get rid of the debt. He didn't follow other former presidents, who made a substantial amount of money in speaking engagements and in making corporate connections. He dedicated himself to humanitarian work. He and his wife Rosalynn built homes for those in need through Habitat for Humanity, worked for global health initiatives, monitoring elections and promoting peace around the world. He also started writing books. He authored thirty books and co-authored two more. Except for the first book, titled, *Why Not the Best*, written in 1975, while he was governor and decided to run for president, all other books were written after the presidency. His books were widely read and twenty of his books became NY Times bestsellers. He was considered the most prolific writer of all presidents in the last century. In one television interview, he revealed that the royalties he received from his book sale helped him financially. Writing became his consistent source of income.

Jimmy Carter also received pensions, like all other former presidents did. He also became a sought-after public speaker. His speaking fees ranged from 50,000 dollars to 100,000 dollars per event and he often donated that money to his charitable foundations. His speaking fees were significantly lower than that of the other former presidents. To him, those speeches were not for earning money, but more for spreading his ideas on peace and service. It is said that Carter also made smart investments in real estate and stocks, which were effective in providing enough financial assets for him.

Jimmy Carter never chased luxury even though he built enough financial assets. He chose to live his entire life in a modest two-bedroom house that he built for himself in

1961. His lifestyle in Plains was as down-to-earth as it got. He enjoyed simple things in life and never saw himself as better than anyone else. His frugality was his choice. In an interview in 2018, he said that he never aspired to be rich. For him, happiness came from living simply and staying close to his roots. It was, indeed, rare to see someone with Carter's level of fame and influence living such an unassuming life.

In July 1979, President Carter delivered a 'Crisis of Confidence' speech from the White House. That speech sparked a significant debate among the experts about its intent. His critics named it a 'Malaise' speech. However, many historians argued that the President offered an honest assessment of the challenges the nation faced. In that speech, he stated the true problems the nation faced that were much deeper than the inflation or recession or the energy crisis. According to him, that threat was nearly invisible to ordinary eyes. It was the crisis of confidence. No other president in the modern time spoke so candidly about the nation's problem. That speech may have contributed to his loss to his challenger Governor Ronald Reagan in the 1980 presidential election, who portrayed America as a shining city on a hill. Recent analysis of that speech, delivered nearly 46 years ago, acknowledged President Carter's foresight, noting, that his warnings about materialism and a need for a renewed sense of purpose resonate in the present day.

Jimmy Carter's accomplishments in his post-presidency are much larger than what I have described in this short write-up. There is a large number of reading materials available in the public domain for the interested readers. In the end, his post-presidency is now considered the most impactful in U.S. history. He lived a full

life—from rural obscurity as a peanut farmer to American presidency, to world fame and universal respect.

His wife, Rosalynn Carter died on 19 November 2023. Both Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter are buried on the grounds of the

house by a willow tree on the lawn of the property. The house is now part of the Jimmy Carter National Historical Park and will be turned into a museum and opened for public tour by the National Park Service. ■

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Rabindranath experienced the deaths of his near and dear ones, he never surrendered, but boldly asserted in a song: There is

sorrow, there is death, there is the anguish of separation, yet there exist peace, joy, and eternity. ■

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| 4 Phanibhusan Tarkabagish, <i>Nyaya Parichaya</i> , Second Chapter, Paschimabanga Rajya Pustak Parshad. | 9 <i>Ashtavakra Gita</i> , Translator Swami Dhireshananda, Udbodhan Karyalaya, 2024, p. 7. The lines, written in Bengali, have been translated into English by the present author. |
| 5 <i>Bhagavad-Gītā</i> , 2.56. | 10 <i>Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita</i> , Part 5. |
| 6 Shree Jyoti Prasad Ghosh, <i>Sabar Janye Sahaje Vedanta</i> in 8th edition of <i>Vedanta Vichitra</i> . | 11 <i>Gitanjali</i> , XI, XCVI. |
| 7 <i>Advaita Vedanter Sarkatha</i> , op. cit. | |

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of distant seriousness, I would perish under the demand for initiating all the devotees and unnecessary hobnobbing.’

Swami Saradananda’s voice was not baritone; all his expressions were mellow. There were hardly any outbursts. His repartees, enlivened with a sense of humour, were like early morning dew, glistening and pleasant to the perceptible minds; and the scorching heat of a blazing sun which could have seared the heart of the listeners was

totally absent. There was never any crudity or highhandedness. Never was any attempt to belittle the listener. Who says that Saradanandaji was bereft of humour? His advice was, ‘If we can cultivate a little humour in our dark days, we will find spiritual life neither boring nor dry, but sweet and encouraging. Association with great souls helps us to do this through their precepts and through their art of spontaneous living.’ (*Glimpses*, p. 94) ■

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