Opinion
Guest Voices
Appreciation



St. John Paul II addresses a press conference with President Jimmy Carter in the Rose Garden at the White House Oct. 6, 1979. (OSV News/CNS file/Chris Sheridan)



by Thomas Higgins

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

December 30, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

I remember a small but telling vignette at the White House, late in Jimmy Carter's presidency. I was on the senior staff, serving as the deputy secretary to the Cabinet, and because of the proximity of my office, I saw a lot of the president in less formal settings.

It was a small, private gathering to honor one of his friends, as I recall, and Carter made some impromptu remarks. The 39th president, who died on Sunday (Dec. 29) at the age of 100, was at his best speaking like this, usually eloquent, frequently self-deprecating and unfailingly charming. But to put the times in context, this was a particularly difficult period for the country.

Advertisement

American diplomats were being held hostage in Tehran, and all attempts to secure their release were failing. Every night, Ted Koppel hosted a show on network television, called "America Held Hostage." Because of the oil embargo, inflation drove the Federal Reserve to drive up interest rates and induce a "shock" inflation. Carter was in a tough re-election campaign against Gov. Ronald Reagan, coming off a wounding (and wholly unnecessary) primary election against Sen. Ted Kennedy.

But he mentioned none of that. Instead he talked about *Now Let Us Praise Famous Men*, James Agee and Walker Evan’s famous work chronicling the lives of tenant farmers in the South during the Depression. He said it was his favorite book, and he quoted one lyrical passage from memory. He spoke about rural poverty with real feeling, like he had witnessed growing up in Plains, Georgia. It was a quiet, graceful moment. I have a better appreciation now of the importance of place. It’s unimaginable to think about Jimmy and Rosalyn Carter and their lives without seeing their hometown’s influence on them.

It’s taken some time, but Carter, who died in Plains, Georgia, on Dec. 29, is now being recognized as one of our most consequential presidents: Landmark domestic legislation in education, the environment, healthcare reform and energy policy; enshrining human rights as a "constitutive element" in American foreign policy; securing the Panama Canal Treaty; recognizing China; and almost single-handedly achieving the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Accord. But he never forgot where he came

from, and it was no surprise that he returned there from the White House.

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter smiles at the premiere of "Jimmy Carter: Man From Plains

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter smiles at the premiere of "Jimmy Carter: Man From Plains" at the Elgin theatre during the 32nd Toronto International Film Festival in Toronto, Canada, Sept. 10, 2007. Carter died Dec. 29, 2024, at 100, at his home in Plains, Georgia. (OSV News/Reuters/Mario Anzuoni)



Then-President Jimmy Carter poses at the White House in Washington March 8, 1977. (OSV News/Marion S. Trikosko/ Library of Congress via Reuters)

President Carter was a deeply moral man. At the last meeting of the Cabinet, I remember Vice President Walter Mondale saying, "We told the truth. We obeyed the law. And we kept the peace." That was hard. The political pressures on Carter to resort to force were immense. But by patient diplomacy, the hostages came home. There were many times when we urged a more politically expedient approach to congressional matters — for example, the timing of the Panama Canal and SALT II

treaties. He would not compromise though, and in the end, he was right.

A good deal of my work was coordinating efforts to deal with various refugee crises. To my knowledge, no other president has had a more principled policy. He never politicized the issue. He was consistently humane and, yes, he took a lot of heat for it. I might note that the strongest and most effective partner we had in our resettlement programs were agencies of the Catholic Church. In my mind, they deserve enormous credit. In the Cuban-Haitian refugee crisis alone, within a year more than 100,000 people were resettled and are now contributing to society.

Carter's moral compass extended all throughout his post presidency, as most people know. From his Georgia home base, he directed a monumental effort in global health and peacekeeping through the Carter Center. Neither he nor Mrs. Carter ever took a dime in personal compensation from the center, and no task was too menial for them in providing assistance. Think of all the nails he hammered building homes at Habitat for Humanity!

For the record, let me say that he could be tough to work for. He was demanding, and if he thought you should have done your job better, he'd let you know. But to a person, we were all extremely loyal to him because we were so proud of what he did and who he was.

The best decision of his life was marrying Rosalynn. She was raised by her widowed mother who took in sewing to make ends meet. They were living above a store in Plains, and she was only 17 when she met Jimmy through his sister. She was 19 when they married, more than 76 years ago. I often think how remarkable her story is — growing up in rural Georgia with modest education, leaving home and eventually becoming one of the most admired women in the world. She was President Carter's full partner and wisest adviser. She attended Cabinet meetings and became the nation's leading advocate for treatment of the mentally ill. She was his rock, she had better political instincts, and they never went to bed angry with each other!

Later in his life, President Carter received many honors, including the Nobel Peace Prize and, with Mrs. Carter, the Medal of Freedom. But he stayed grounded at home, where he taught Sunday School for decades. His favorite Bible verse was from Micah 6:8. "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God." That is his legacy. Thank you, Mr. President.