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Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale are seen at the Democratic National Convention at Madison Square Garden, July 15, 1976 in New York City. Jimmy Carter died Dec. 29, 2024, his presidential library announced. At 100, Carter was the longest-living U.S. president. (OSV News/Library of Congress handout via Reuters/Warren K. Leffler)



by Sr. Christine Schenk

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As I watched former President Jimmy Carter's funeral on Jan. 9, the testimonials of his courage, wisdom and integrity — delivered within the context of worship and Christian witness that anchored Carter's life — moved me deeply, particularly in contrast to the 47th president who will soon be sworn into office.

Like many others, I remembered Jimmy Carter more for what he did after he left office than for any policies he enacted. I had long admired Carter's unstinting passion for serving the marginalized, which he and his wife Rosalynn pursued through the Carter Center for more than 40 years after leaving office. But I didn't remember many details about his presidency, except that he left office under a cloud because of inflation and the Iran hostage crisis.

So it was heartening to discover how prophetic — and consequential — his presidency had been, often at considerable cost. Walter Mondale's son Ted read a posthumous eulogy written by his father who had served as Carter's vice president. Ted Mondale, in his father's words, said:

> Very few people in the 1970s had heard the term "climate change." Yet Carter put his presidency on the line to pass laws to conserve energy, deregulate new oil and gas prices and invest in clean, renewable alternatives to fossil fuels. … In many ways, he laid the foundation for future presidents to come to grips with climate change. Some thought he was crazy to fight so hard to pass these laws, but he was dead right.

When Carter asked Mondale to be his vice president, Mondale had consented, with two requests: "I wanted to make a real contribution and I didn't want to be embarrassed as many of my predecessors have." Carter gave orders to his staff to treat Mondale with the same respect they would give to Carter.

As their time in the White House drew to a close, Mondale and Carter discussed how best to describe their tenure: "We came up with a sentence which remains an

important summary of our work," said Mondale: " 'We told the truth, we obeyed the law, and we kept the peace.' "

Given that Donald Trump, Mike Pence and JD Vance were all in attendance at the Washington National Cathedral, I suspect Mondale's words landed with a certain ironic potency. I could not help sending up a (long shot) prayer that these same values might somehow find a home in the new administration.



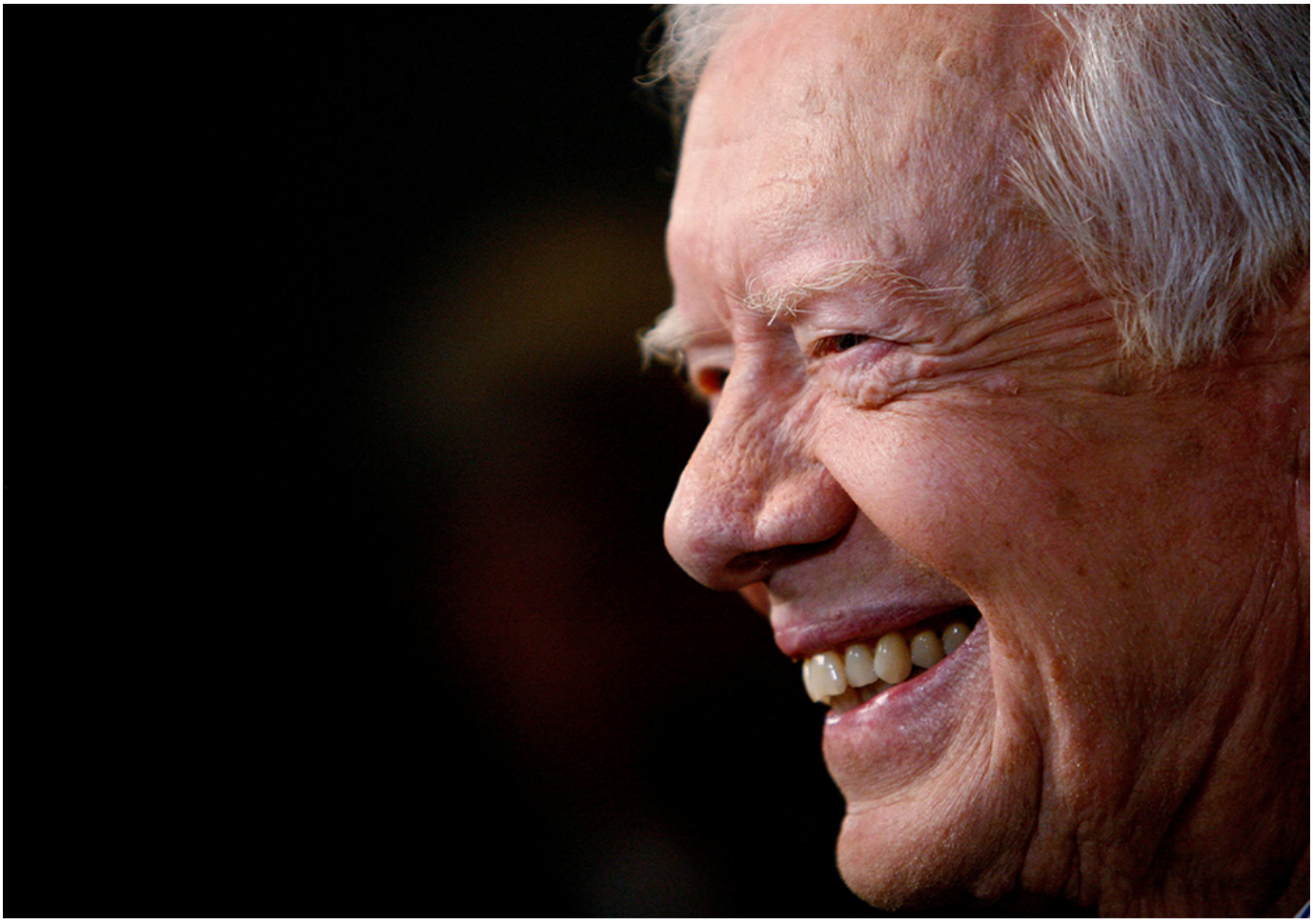
U.S. President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, former U.S. President Barack Obama, former President Bill Clinton, former Vice President Mike Pence and President-elect Donald Trump attend the state funeral service of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter at the Washington National Cathedral Jan. 9, 2025. At 100, Carter was the longest-living former U.S. president at the time of his death in Plains, Ga., Dec. 29, 2024. His body laid in state in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda Jan. 7-9. (OSV News/Brendan McDermid, Reuters)

Stuart Eizenstat, Carter's domestic policy adviser, pointedly countered a common political trope about Carter's presidency:

> As we lay our 39th president to rest, it's time to redeem his presidency, and also lay to rest the myth that his greatest achievements came only as a former president. The test of American presidents is not the number of years they serve, but the duration of their accomplishments. By this measure, Jimmy Carter was among the most consequential one-term presidents in American history.

Eizenstat praised Carter's success in obtaining bipartisan support for his initiatives, noting that independent surveys had indicated he had "one of the highest success rates in passing his major legislation of any American president." Carter also created FEMA and the Department of Education.  Eizenstat said we could thank Carter for ethics in government laws and comprehensive civil service reform.

As to Carter's political courage, Eizenstat said: "President Carter parked politics at the Oval Office door to do what he believed was the right thing, taking controversial challenges on, regardless of the political consequences."



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)

For Eizenstat, the appointment of Paul Volcker to lead the Federal Reserve best embodied Carter's prioritization of the good of ordinary people over political gain. Widespread inflation  had afflicted the two previous Republican presidencies, and now his own. Carter took a risk that, with the hostage crisis, likely cost him reelection. In his tribute, Eizenstat told the story:

> Over the objection of all of his advisers, he chose Paul Volcker to lead the Federal Reserve, knowing in advance that Volcker's tough monetary policy would raise interest rates and unemployment, because Paul told him that. And would do so in a presidential election year. 'You take care of the economy, Paul, I'll take care of the politics' [Carter told him]. Inflation indeed dropped like a rock after he left office and remained low for decades.

Jimmy Carter was also a staunch lifelong advocate for women. "He dramatically increased the ranks of female circuit and district court judges, including Ruth Bader Ginsburg. In all, he  appointed five times as many women to the federal bench as all of the previous presidents had from the beginning of our country," said Mondale, who also noted that women on the White House staff had played key roles in developing Carter's "highest-priority energy and environmental proposals."

In October 2000, Carter discontinued his lifelong affiliation with Southern Baptists after leaders voted that women could no longer serve as pastors: "I personally feel the Bible says all people are equal in the eyes of God. I personally feel that women should play an absolutely equal role in service of Christ in the Church," he said. A bit closer to home, Carter told Stephen Colbert in 2014 that he would become Catholic "when a female Catholic priest asks me to join her church."

As may now be apparent, I disagree with my colleague Michael Sean Winters who wrote that James Earl Carter Jr. was a failed politician.

It is a mistake to equate Carter's nonelection with being a political failure.

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The ignorance — and often the fickleness — of the American electorate should not be discounted, nor should the many complex variables over which no administration has control.

Jimmy Carter held to his principles over politics and, as we have seen, this had lasting importance. In Eizenstat's words, "The test of American presidents is not the number of years they served, but the duration of their accomplishments."

For me the successful politician is one who, like Jimmy Carter, makes the hard call to do what is right, regardless of political risks. Which is why this Gospel text from Carter's funeral seems especially apropos:

> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ... Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:10,12).

**Related:** Remembering Jimmy Carter: A good man and a failed politician