

As President, Jimmy Carter Was Not a “Peacemaker”



The late Carter’s foreign policy record as president was mixed at best. GETTY IMAGES

The recent passing of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter has led to some well-deserved praise of his legacy, particularly in regard to his exemplary service as a peacemaker and humanitarian since leaving the White House in 1981. During his post-presidency, he was also subjected to heavy criticism for his willingness to speak out against military intervention and the support for repressive governments offered by successive administrations of both parties. In particular, his willingness to challenge the ongoing Israeli occupation and colonization of occupied Palestinian territories was met with [vehement condemnation](#), even from fellow Democrats.

What many people forget, however, is that Carter’s administration failed to consistently uphold the principles for which Carter so admirably defended as an ex-president: peace, international law and human rights.

Here are some examples:

He appointed Zbigniew Brzezinski, the hawkish Cold Warrior, as U.S. National Security Advisor. In that role Brzezinski fought back against more moderate State Department leaders and emerged as Carter’s foreign affairs mentor and perhaps his closest White House confidant.

President Carter came to office not long after Indonesia invaded and annexed the tiny island nation of East Timor. During his first year in office, he increased military aid to the Indonesian dictatorship by 80%. This equipment, including OV-10 Bronco counter-insurgency aircraft that was crucial in the rounding up of much of the country’s civilian population into concentration camps or forcing them into remote mountain areas where tens of thousands starved. Most of up to the 150,000 East Timorese deaths that occurred as a result of Indonesia’s occupation took place during the Carter administration, in part as a result of this military aid.

Carter also dramatically increased military aid to the Moroccan government, whose forces invaded and illegally annexed its southern neighbor, the desert nation of Western Sahara, barely a year before he assumed office. Carter successfully

fought Congress to restore military aid to Turkey that had been suspended after their armed forces seized the northern third of the Republic of Cyprus in 1974. Carter promised that the resumption of aid would give Turkey the flexibility to withdraw, yet Turkish occupation forces remain there to this day.

All three of these U.S. allies were in violation of repeated demands by the UN Security Council that they unconditionally withdraw from these occupied territories.

Under President Carter, the United States vetoed consecutive UN Security Council resolutions to impose sanctions against the white-minority regime in South Africa for its occupation of Namibia and its apartheid system. Ignoring calls from the Namibians and the democratic South African opposition to impose such pressure, Carter took the line of American corporate interests by claiming U.S. investments somehow supported the cause of racial justice and majority rule. (Barely five years after Carter left office, the United States imposed sanctions against South Africa by huge bipartisan Congressional majorities and stopped vetoing similar UN efforts, eventually resulting in a negotiated transition to a multiracial democracy.)

When the people of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (then known as Zaire) rebelled against their brutal and corrupt dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, Carter ordered the U.S. Air Force to fly in Moroccan troops to help crush the popular uprising and save the regime.

Carter sent military aid to the Islamist mujahideen to fight the Communist government in Afghanistan with the full knowledge that it could prompt a Soviet invasion. According to Brzezinski, the administration hoped that forcing the Soviets into such a counter-insurgency war would weaken America's superpower rival. The cascading series of tragic events as a result of that decision are still being felt today.

As president, while supporting the concept of a Palestinian homeland, Carter failed to openly support an independent Palestinian state, refused to even meet with Palestinian leaders, and dramatically increased military aid to the right-wing Israeli government of Menachem Begin. He fired his ambassador to the United Nations, former Congressman and Civil Rights leader Andrew Young, after Young met with the Palestinian representative at the UN. When Israel violated an annex to the Camp David Accords by resuming construction of illegal settlements on the occupied West Bank, Carter did not take action to enforce the treaty despite being its guarantor. Carter also dramatically increased military aid to the increasingly repressive Egyptian regime of Anwar Sadat.

Meanwhile, Carter ordered that the evidence his administration had acquired of a joint South African-Israeli nuclear test be covered up to protect their governments from international outrage.

In May 1980, pro-democracy protesters seized the center of the South Korean city of Gwangju, challenging the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan. Carter ordered the release of South Korean troops under U.S. command at the request of the dictator in order for them to retake the city for the regime, massacring hundreds. (When former South Korean dictator Syngman Rhee made a similar request that his troops be released from U.S. command two decades earlier, President Dwight Eisenhower refused.)

President Carter ignored pleas from Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero to not send arms and advisors to the military-led junta whose forces were massacring peasant leaders, trade unionists, priests, human rights workers and other dissidents. Carter continued his military support of the junta even after Romero himself was assassinated while giving Mass, a shooting carried out under the orders of a top Salvadoran general. After temporarily suspending military aid to the junta following the rape and murder of four American churchwomen by Salvadoran troops, Carter resumed aid at record levels just days before leaving office in response to an offensive by leftist rebels.

Carter was the president who enacted Presidential Directive 59, codifying an initiative under President Richard Nixon which authorized American strategic forces to switch to a counterforce strategy, targeting Soviet nuclear weapons in their silos, indicating a dangerous shift in nuclear policy from deterrence to that of a potential first-strike. He opposed calls for a freeze on the production, testing, and deployment of new nuclear weapons and weapons systems and instead supported the development of nuclear cruise, Pershing, and MX missiles, as well as the neutron bomb.

Despite publicly encouraging the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran to improve the country's horrific human rights situation, Carter supported the monarch almost to the end, even as the Shah ordered his forces to fire onto thousands of unarmed demonstrators. During the hostage crisis, Carter dismissed Iranian anger at the 1953 U.S.-led overthrow of the country's constitutional government by saying that it was "ancient history," a particularly ironic comment in reference to a 2,500-year-old civilization.

Carter was also a strong supporter of Philippines dictator Ferdinand Marcos, Pakistani General Zia ul-Haq, Saudi King Fahd and other autocrats. He blocked efforts in Congress to apply stricter human rights conditions to arms transfers. After a slight decrease in military spending in his first budget, he dramatically increased it in subsequent years. And he reinstated draft registration that had been suspended seven years earlier.

Though Carter was unfairly attacked by Republicans and even hawks within his own party, it's often forgotten that most rank-and-file Democrats thought he was too militaristic.

Carter also approved the development of a Rapid Deployment Force in the Persian Gulf, threatening war to protect U.S. oil supplies through what became known as the Carter Doctrine. And he dramatically increased the U.S. military presence in the Indian Ocean.

Though Carter was unfairly attacked by Republicans and even hawks within his own party, it's often forgotten that most rank-and-file Democrats thought he was too militaristic. He was challenged in the 1980 Democratic primary by both Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy and California Governor Jerry Brown, who criticized Carter's foreign policy from the left. His renomination at the 1980 Democratic National Convention in New York brought more protesters out onto the streets than the infamous 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago.

This is not to say there weren't also positive foreign policy initiatives under Carter's presidency. His human rights policy, despite its contradictions, led to the release of hundreds of political prisoners and saved a number of lives. He suspended military aid to Chile, Guatemala and some other Latin American dictatorships. He pushed through the Panama Canal Treaty over strident opposition by some Congressional Republicans. He worked hard to advance nuclear arms control through the SALT II Treaty, which he signed but the Senate failed to ratify. He finally recognized the People's Republic of China. He increased development aid to the Global South. He resisted demands the U.S. bomb Iran during the hostage crisis, resulting in the eventual release of all the American hostages unharmed after Carter left office. He did not start any new wars.

Ironically, it was his more reasonable foreign policy choices that opened him up to attacks by his Republican opponents and the mainstream media. Similarly, while his centrist economic policies alienated him from many progressives, Republicans attacked him for being too liberal and had some success in blaming him for the economic stagnation and high inflation during the latter part of this term, even though these issues were in many ways beyond his control.

And every one of Carter's more problematic policies were greatly worsened under President Ronald Reagan, who defeated him in the 1980 election, ironically campaigning on the charge that Carter was overly-concerned with human rights and not militaristic enough.

Most American political leaders, as they have gotten older and more experienced in foreign affairs, have tended to become less idealistic and more prone to support military solutions to conflict. Carter, however, went in the opposite direction. His exemplary work as a peacemaker in his post-presidential years, which won him the 2002 Nobel Peace Prize, fully deserves the praise he has received.

As a one-term Georgia governor with little foreign policy experience, Carter as president was forced to rely on the foreign policy and national security establishment, including many of the architects of the Vietnam War, to guide his policies. The fact is that even a moral man, placed at the helm of a machine designed for imperial domination, can only steer it so far from the direction for which it is designed.

Therefore, while it is important to acknowledge the more problematic aspects of Carter's foreign policy as president, we should nevertheless celebrate how, once freed from those constraints, he spent the rest of his life working to build a better world.