



The 39th President of the United States, Nobel Peace Prize recipient and co-founder of the Carter Center discusses his remarkable staying power as a thought leader.

Thought Leader Interview:

President Jimmy Carter

by **Karen Christensen**

How did growing up in Plains, Georgia shape the person you have become?

I come from a long line of farmers, reaching back more than 300 years. As a child I worked alongside my father and our sharecroppers growing peanuts, cotton, sugarcane and corn. The roots of my ambition lay in my desire to leave Plains and go off and do something different. Nobody in my family had ever finished high school before me, and my daddy made it clear that he wanted me to get a college education. That desire was planted in me by the time I was six years old. When the time came, it was during the Depression, and college was financially impossible. The only two free colleges in America at the time were military ones – West Point and Annapolis, so I wound up at the Naval Academy. Overall, in my early years I had a very stable life with a protective family. I had an excellent education, so I was prepared for almost any eventuality. I give a lot of credit to the small town I grew up in: I benefited greatly from good schools, a deeply religious environment and close-knit relationships that have benefited me for the rest of my years. When I was four, I actually lived right next door to my future wife, Rosalynn – she was just one year-old then. Both of us were given every opportunity to utilize our talents and abilities. Today, we still live in Plains, which has grown to about 630 residents.

What drew you into politics?

I was strongly influenced by my father, who played a vital role in our tiny village and the surrounding community – in the church,

on the local school board, and the local hospital authority. He also ran for the legislature and served in the House of Representatives. In 1953, when he was dying, I returned home from the Navy to look after the family business, and I began to emulate what he had been doing, becoming chairman of the local school board. This was during the integration years – very difficult times. Some of the major politicians in Georgia, even those that were looked upon as being moderate, were promising that if one black child went into the public school system, they would close it down. I still remember the slogan of the candidate for governor at the time: “No, not one.” I set out to try to protect the school system from such intolerance. When I was finally elected and got to Atlanta, my request to the Senate was to be put on the Education Committee. So it was actually my interest in education that got me into politics.

The Presidency itself was just one pinnacle in your career, followed by a Nobel Peace Prize and the world-changing initiatives of the Carter Center. At age 84, you show no signs of slowing down. To what do you attribute your remarkable staying power?

I’ve been blessed with good health, and I’ve always taken a lot of exercise. I was a long-distance runner in college, and while I was President I exercised every day. I still swim, take bike rides and go for long walks. My wife is a nutrition expert, so we eat a proper diet. For the last 62 years I’ve been sustained in large part by the support of Rosalynn and our wonderful family – three sons and a daughter. I’ve had an opportunity, having been President





A seminal moment from the 1970s.

and so forth, to lead a life of varied interests, opportunities and challenges, which has kept me constantly stimulated to learn new things. I'm also now in my 27th year as a college professor – I was teaching a class this morning at Emory University. I think that the wide diversity of my interests and challenges and sometimes accomplishments, along with my good health and a stable family life, may be the answer to your question.

Americans are not the most popular people in the world right now. What has to happen to change that?

It has already happened: it happened on November 4th when we held an election that has excited and inspired the world and restored a great deal of the lost reputation that America has suffered during the last eight years. I don't think there's any doubt that the inauguration of **Barack Obama** will help to restore America's reputation in the world. November 4th was an exciting day for all Americans, in particular for all of us Democrats. Obama has brought an end to a long period of racial discrimination in our country and has inspired young people. In my own family, there are 26 direct descendants of me and Rosalynn, and Obama got all 26 votes.

The Carter Center has virtually eradicated a little-known but horrifying disease called Guinea worm – taking it from 3.5 million cases to fewer than 5,000. What made you set out to tackle this wicked problem?

The basic premise of the Carter Center is that we deal with neglected problems that we feel are 'vacuums' in the world. If the **United Nations** or the **World Health Organization** or the U.S. government is dealing adequately with something, we don't get involved in it. We only tackle the problems that no one wants to undertake. Guinea worm was a horribly-neglected disease and one of the most unsavoury afflictions on earth. When we decided to take it on, it wasn't even being discussed anywhere else. Nevertheless, we set out to completely eradicate this disease from the face of the earth. We found that it existed in about 20 nations, in 23,600 villages – some of the most remote and isolated villages in the world, which had no opportunity for clean drinking water. These people were drinking stagnant and impure water, which was the origin of the disease. The Carter Center has now been to each of the villages and has virtually eradicated the disease with the help of many partners. We are currently concentrating on the last few-thousand cases. We went into these villages to educate people about what caused the disease and how they could prevent it, then we monitored their progress and provided them with the materials necessary to accomplish the goal. It gives me great pleasure to say that we've been able to transform the lives of three and a half million people and all of their descendants, who will never again see a case of Guinea worm.

Thirty years after the Camp David Accords, you have yet to give up on peace in the Middle East. Do you have any recent progress to report?

The Middle East peace process has been stalemated for a number of years, which is why the Carter Center continues to play a role there. We look upon the peace process as one that is ongoing, and we are currently dealing with all of the players who would ultimately be involved in a final settlement of differences

The Basic Principles of the Carter Centre

In partnership with Emory University, the Carter Center is guided by a fundamental commitment to human rights and the alleviation of human suffering. It seeks to prevent and resolve conflicts, enhance freedom and democracy, and improve health, and is guided by five principles:

1. The Center emphasizes action and results. Based on careful research and analysis, it is prepared to take timely action on important and pressing issues.
2. The Center does not duplicate the effective efforts of others.
3. The Center addresses difficult problems and recognizes the possibility of failure as an acceptable risk.
4. The Center is non-partisan and acts as a neutral in dispute-resolution activities.
5. The Center believes that people can improve their lives when provided with the necessary skills, knowledge, and access to resources.
6. The Center collaborates with other organizations, public or private, in carrying out its mission.



President Carter continues to tackle the world's wicked problems at age 84.

to end civil wars. I've just finished a book [published in January 2009] called *We Can Bring Peace to the Holy Land*. I continue to visit this region and deal intimately with the people involved in leading the countries there. The Carter Center has monitored all three Palestinian elections in the West Bank and Gaza, and in doing so we have had to be intimately involved with every village and hamlet in the Occupied Territories and with each of the candidates for public office. And obviously we have to be thoroughly knowledgeable about the policies of Israel. Our deep immersion in the peace process for the last 30 years has perhaps helped to lay the groundwork for what I hope will be a successful consummation of this process under our new President.

What will it take to achieve peace?

The world community knows the basic principles of a solution. It's all been written: the Arab countries – all 22 of them – have publicly announced that they would recognize Israel diplomatically and economically, if Israel will withdraw from the Palestinian-occupied territories and implement the basic United Nations resolutions. However, it will take a lot of strong influence from the United States to get both sides to that point.

Do you worry about the Carter Center's future, without you and Rosalynn at the helm?

Thankfully, I don't. With an adequate endowment, a strong relationship with Emory University and proven ties with other influential individuals and organizations, the Center has a solid foundation for continuing its work after Rosalynn and I 'reduce the level of our participation'. Led by our chairman **John Moores**, the members of the Board of Trustees – half of whom are appointed by Emory – have already increased their personal involvement and will shape all policies in the future. Of course, some of their challenges and opportunities will evolve from our past experience. Emory President **James Wagner** has continued the close relationship with the Carter Center first established by **Jim Laney**, and our president and CEO Dr. **John Hardman** leads an amazing staff that is implementing the Center's multiple

President Jimmy Carter, Poet

In addition to his public achievements, President Carter is also a poet, painter and furniture maker. Following is one of his poems.

Committee of Scholars Describe the Future Without Me

Some shy professors, forced to write
about a time that's bound to come
when my earthly life is done
described my demise
in lovely euphemistic words
invoking pleasant visions of
burial rites, with undertakers,
friends, and pious pastors
gathered round my flowered casket
eyes uplifted
breaking new semantic ground
not by saying
I have passed on
joined my Maker
or gone to the promised land
but stating the lamented fact
in the best of terms
that I, now dead, have
reduced my level of participation.

programs around the world.

Going forward, my hope is that the Carter Center will enhance its ability to detect early threats to peace, and to move aggressively when non-governmental involvement is appropriate. A good example is our special knowledge of the complex interrelationships in the Middle East and a proven willingness to remain directly involved despite the sensitive political restraints. Working closely with other organizations that espouse peace, justice and respect for human rights, we will continue to pursue every opportunity to realize these ideals for the people of Israel, the Palestinians, and others in the area. We take heart from worldwide trends toward democracy. According to **Freedom House**, only 84 independent nations were free or partly free when I became president in 1977; this number has since increased to 149. One of the Carter Center's top priorities will be to help this trend continue.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment?

I'm definitely proud of the recognition I've had, politically speaking, by being President of a great country and receiving the Nobel Peace Prize. I'm obviously proud of my marriage, and of the fact that my family is still growing: Rosalynn and I have 11 grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

Politically, it was a great accomplishment to be acknowledged for achieving peace between Israel and Egypt. When I left office, my hope was that this would be the foundation for

peace between Israel and all of her neighbors; but we're still working on that. I'm also very proud of some of the things that the Carter Center has done: none is more striking than the eradication of Guinea worm, but we do a lot of other good things. For instance, we just finished putting two bed nets into every home in Ethiopia that has malaria mosquitoes. Fifty-million people will benefit from this, and they have already seen a 50 per cent reduction of malaria.

You and Rosalynn have been happily married for 62 years. What is your recipe for a successful marriage?

We're quite independent in our attitudes and we have different interests. We learned early on to give each other plenty of space, and for decades now, we have made it a policy to never go to sleep at night without resolving any differences that exist between us. Sometimes that isn't easy, but we abide by it. The other thing we do, and I wrote a book about this not long ago called *Sharing Good Times*, is that we make a point to share as many interesting experiences as possible: Rosalynn is a full partner with me in everything that the Carter Center does; we became, dare I say, near-expert fly-fishers after I became Governor; we began downhill skiing together when I was 62; and we are avid bird-watchers. So we do a lot of things together as well as giving each other plenty of space to do our own things. We respect each other's idiosyncrasies.

Looking around at the world today, what gives you the most hope?

I would have to say it is the restoration of America as a super power, in many aspects of that word. At the moment, we are still a superpower militarily, since our military budget equals the combined budget of all other nations on earth; and despite current troubles, we still have a powerful economic machine. But I would hope and expect that in the future, we will once again be seen as the champion of peace in the world. My goal would be for any nation on earth that had a problem to naturally say, 'Why don't we go to Washington to settle this, because the United States is the champion of peace', or 'the world's leader in human rights', or 'because that great nation leads the world in protecting the environment and combating global warming'. These are the kinds of things that I hope and pray will occur in the future. This would make us a superpower in every aspect of the word: for peace, for democracy, for freedom, for protecting the environment, for alleviating suffering and for championing human rights. **R**

James Earl 'Jimmy' Carter served as the 39th President of the United States from 1977-1981. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002 for his decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts. Together with his wife Rosalynn he founded the Carter Center in 1982. In partnership with Emory University, the Center is committed to advancing peace and health worldwide. He is the author of 24 books, including *We Can Achieve Peace in the Holy Land* (Simon and Schuster, 2009) and *Beyond the White House: Waging Peace, Fighting Disease, Building Hope* (Simon and Schuster, 2007). This interview took place on November 12, 2008.