

What I learned from Jimmy Carter one Sunday in Georgia

IAIN BOEKHOFF

PLAINS, GA.

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

UPDATED 1 HOUR AGO

FOR SUBSCRIBERS



Former President Jimmy Carter teaches Sunday School class at Maranatha Baptist Church in his hometown in Plains, Georgia on Aug. 23, 2015.

DAVID GOLDMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Georgia in September probably isn't the first place you would plan to spend your vacation.

But I was on a pilgrimage, what I figured would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience of seeing former U.S. president Jimmy Carter teach Sunday school.

I'm not religious, nor did I know a whole lot about Mr. Carter, having been born well after his presidency ended. But from what I had read about his life after politics, he was living a superhuman life, one I wanted to learn from firsthand. And after that warm Sunday at Maranatha Baptist Church, he had a convert to the Carter way of life.

[Mr. Carter died on Sunday at the age of 100.](#) It was in this tiny rural town of Plains, Ga., that he was born, met his wife, lived before and after the White House, and died. At the time of my trip, he was a few weeks shy of his 94th birthday. Hundreds had travelled here as they had so many Sundays before, some standing in line as early as midnight for the chance to listen to Mr. Carter.



Mr. Carter and Rosalynn Carter at home in Plains, Ga., in 2017. Mr. Carter was the longest-living president in United States history, etching his name next to another milestone as he led a rich postpresidential life that spanned more than four decades. DUSTIN CHAMBERS/THE NEW YORK TIMES NEWS SERVICE

As our heads were bowed in prayer, Mr. Carter shuffled into the sanctuary. His energy changed the room, his hunched over stature belying a vigour

unmatched by people a quarter of his age. It felt less like we were in a church and more like we were in his home.

He began by asking everyone where they were from. The first response was Washington. “Used to live there,” he quipped.

[Opinion: Remembering Jimmy Carter, a presidential study in contradiction and high conduct](#)

He then gave a brief update on what he’d been up to in the past few weeks: a fishing trip in Montana with Ted Turner, building homes with Habitat for Humanity in Indiana, welcoming students for the fall semester at the university he taught at in Atlanta.

For the next 40 minutes, he weaved teachings from the Bible with stories from his life, and was alternately inspiring and humorous. What he left us with was a guide for not just being good and doing good, but being the absolute best you can be.

On marriage



Mr. and Mrs. Carter watch a game between the Atlanta Hawks and the New York Knicks at State Farm Arena on Valentine's Day in 2019. USA TODAY USPW

Mr. Carter was a farmer, businessman, politician, author, professor, woodworker, painter, Sunday school teacher, builder of homes, peace negotiator, election scrutineer, champion of equality, climate-change advocate and eradicator of disease.

But above all, he was a husband to Rosalynn Carter.

In their more than seven decades of marriage, they achieved all they possibly could separately and together. They devoted their lives to others, to those around them and those they would never meet. After their days in the White House, promoting democracy, peace and world health became their mission. You know, small problems.

What got them through all those years was a commitment to each other, even when they were at loggerheads. Something the Carters decided they would never do is go to sleep angry. “And we’ve been angry a lot of times.”



Mr. and Mrs. Carter are seen holding hands at the weeklong Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project in Mishawaka, Ind., in 2018. It was their 35th year volunteering for the charity.

ROBERT FRANKLIN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr. Carter also shared a story about how he managed to save face one year when he forgot Mrs. Carter's birthday.

"Years ago, I made a mistake. I woke up, went in my study, turned on the computer and it said August the 18th. And I said, 'oh gosh I have forgotten about Rosie's birthday present, it's her birthday.'

[A look back at Jimmy Carter's biggest challenges as U.S. president](#)

"So I asked her what I could do to help her out in the morning and I told her I would give her that gift for the rest of my life. She says, 'Well I would like to have orange juice and coffee early in the morning.'

"So for the last 15 or 20 years, at the beginning of the morning I always go in the kitchen and get an orange juice and coffee and take it to Rosalynn. And she rewards me with a kiss. So we start every day – because I've been so nice to her – with a kiss, and she says, 'Thank you, Jimmy.' "

On principles

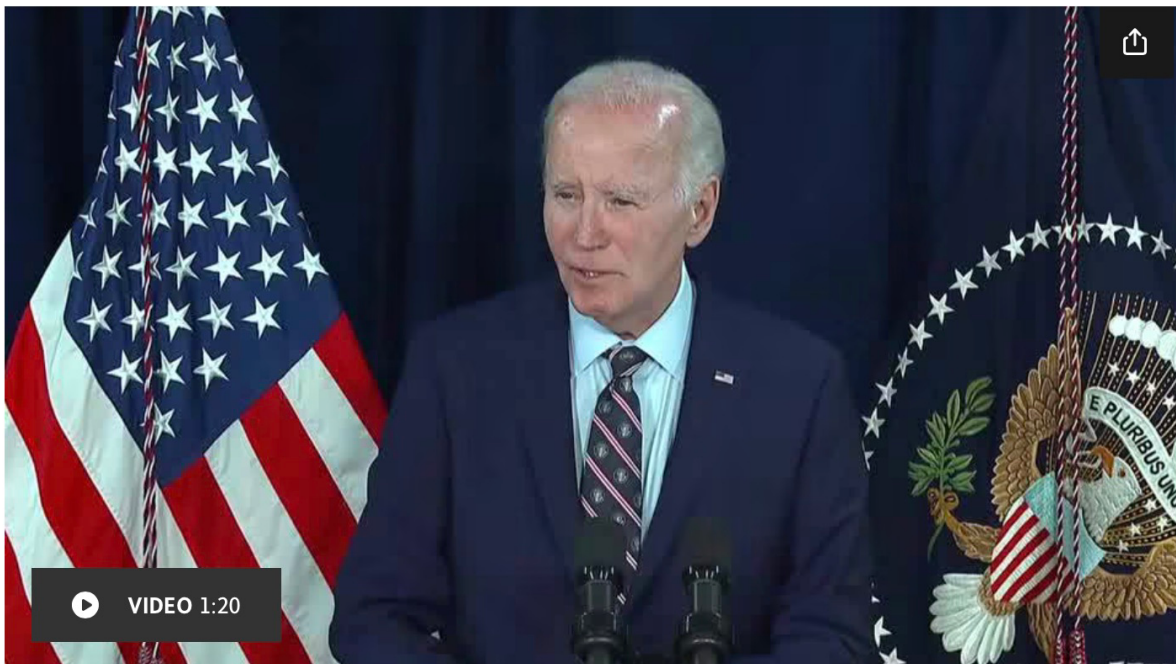


Mr. Carter waves to the crowd as he and Mrs. Carter arrive at the Plains Baptist Church to attend services in Plains, Ga., Nov. 22, 1976. Mr. and Mrs. Carter were ahead of their time on many social issues.

ANONYMOUS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr. Carter had a fierce belief in right and wrong, founded in his personal experience and faith. You could sense the internal fire he had when talking about an injustice.

Both he and Mrs. Carter were ahead of their time on many social issues, from racial equality, climate change (the solar panels Mr. Carter had installed on the White House in 1979 were infamously removed by his successor) to mental health (a cause championed by Mrs. Carter as first lady and later through their foundation).



U.S. President Joe Biden remembered former U.S. President Jimmy Carter as "a statesman, a humanitarian.. and a dear friend," on Sunday (December 29) after the former president, who brokered peace between Israel and Egypt and later received the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian work, died at age 100.

REFILEDC

The church we were sitting in was started by Mr. Carter after his former church held a vote to ban Black people from being members and his family counted among the few votes against.

Reading from the Book of James, Mr. Carter preached about the personal responsibility each of us has in our own lives. If anyone of us feels like they don't have a purpose or happiness or adventure in our life, it's up to us to change that.

"We decide every day, this is the kind of person I want to be," he said.

On service



Former President Jimmy Carter works with other volunteers on site during the first day of the weeklong Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Work Project in Mishawaka, Ind., in 2018.

ROBERT FRANKLIN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

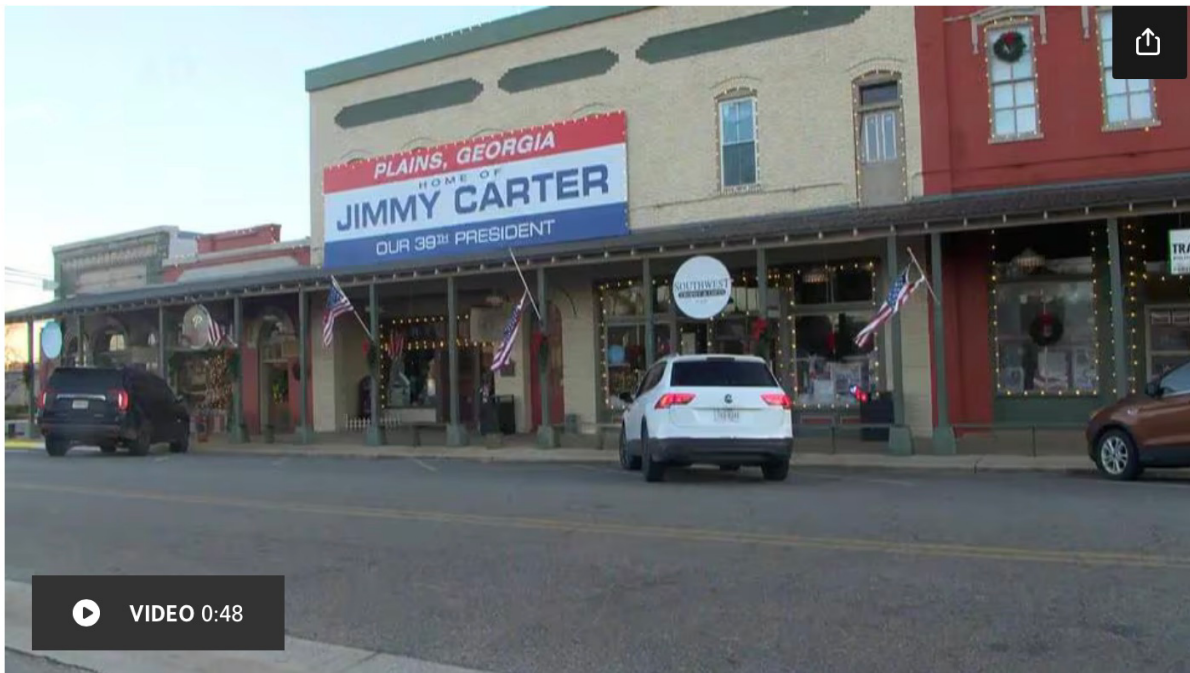
The scale and breadth with which Jimmy and Rosalynn tackled problems is breathtaking. Who even thinks they can eradicate a disease, in addition to strengthening democracies, conservation efforts and building thousands of homes? It turns out, the Carters can.

As one of their friends told me, they exercised daily, ate healthy and did everything they could to live longer because they knew the value they could bring to a cause, and the longer they lived the more people they could help.

Beginning in the 1980s, they turned their attention to a tropical disease neglected by the world: Guinea worm. Mr. Carter once said he hoped to live until the disease was eradicated, and he nearly saw that in his lifetime: Cases have fallen from 3½ million in the mid-1980s to 13 in 2022, largely owing to

the efforts of the Carters' foundation. It would be the second human disease to be eradicated, after smallpox, and the first without a medicine or vaccine.

The 39th and longest-lived U.S. president, James Earl Carter Jr., died Sunday at the age of 100. His life ended where it began, in Plains, Georgia. People in that town remembered Carter on Sunday.



The 39th and longest-lived U.S. president, James Earl Carter Jr., died Sunday at the age of 100. His life ended where it began, in Plains, Georgia. People in that town remembered Carter on Sunday.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

For nearly 40 years, the Carters spent one week a year building homes with Habitat for Humanity. Mr. Carter explained they alternated one year in a foreign country, one year in the United States, noting he had helped build 150 houses in Canada for its sesquicentennial the year before.

No issue was too big or too small – their first instinct was wanting to help. Later that Sunday, the Carters attended a small service for church members where someone offered prayers for a relative who had been unable to see a doctor. Mr. Carter turned around, said that wasn't right, and if the man would send him an e-mail he'd get them in to see his doctor in Atlanta.



Mr. Carter observes a polling station for Sudan's first multiparty elections in decades in Khartoum in April, 2010.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

During the Sunday school teaching, Mr. Carter referenced the day's reading from the Book of James, offering a lesson that seemed to epitomize his life philosophy: "You're reconciled with God through faith. You're reconciled with other human beings through love. And your love is demonstrated by good works."

On faith



Mr. Carter smiles as he returns to Maranatha Baptist Church to teach Sunday School on Sunday, June 9, 2019, less than a month after falling and breaking his hip. A member of the congregation made a special chair for Mr. Carter from a boat seat that would raise and lower the former president.

CURTIS COMPTON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr. Carter's Christian faith guided him throughout his life. He told the story of being in despair after losing his first run for governor of Georgia. His sister, Ruth, hearing that he was going through one of the worst periods of his life, read to him a passage from James about how trials and setbacks are an opportunity to strengthen faith. It was then he rededicated himself to doing good and a life of service.

In a sign of both the Carters' continued dedication to their faith, they read passages from the Bible to each other before bed at night, even when they were travelling apart, for more than 60 years. And he helped his church by being a deacon, Sunday school teacher and active member, right down to personally handcrafting the wooden collection trays and a cross in the sanctuary.



Mr. Carter and Mrs. Carter bow their heads in prayer with members and visitors during the worship service at Maranatha Baptist Church on Sunday, June 9, 2019, in Plains, Ga.

CURTIS COMPTON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The foundation of his marriage, his principles and his service was faith. He lived according to the teachings of the Bible, but he said all religions “epitomize the highs of moral ethics.”

The example Jimmy Carter set is one we can all aspire to: devotion to others, unwavering moral conviction, good humour, a little bit of faith and a whole lot of love.

The life of Jimmy Carter

- THE LATEST:

Jimmy Carter, former U.S. president and Nobel Peace Prize winner, dies at 100.

- WHO HE WAS:

Remembering Jimmy Carter, a presidential study in contradiction and high conduct.

- DEFINING EVENTS:

A look back at Jimmy Carter's biggest challenges as U.S. president.

- GREAT ACTS:

Fighting inflation by deregulation and appointing Paul Volcker.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-jimmy-carter-death-plains-georgia/>

I misjudged Mr. Carter for many years. I blamed the “circus” his White House seemed to be for having given the Reagan “Morning in America” hokum opportunity to get established. President Carter was said to be such a control freak that he took over scheduling use of the White House tennis courts; a President has bigger matters to which to attend. As Maureen Dowd has noted (<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/11/opinion/columnists/five-presidents-and-a-funeral.html>), Carter could often be a self-righteous prig who excessively disdained the Washington fixtures he could have handled more adroitly. He was a smart guy; Admiral Rickover gave him a central role in developing the first nuclear submarine. He was also brave: For the sake of many, he took an almost-minute dose of reactor meltdown radiation in 1952 outside Ottawa and lived to be 100. But really, we have seen how voters are unforgiving of governments that don't or can't protect them from runaway inflation. As well, the Khomeini Iranians kept the hostages to help sink his Presidency. Many things that did him in as President were not his fault or doing. His devotion to Rosalynn—her devotion to him—was beyond remarkable. (Though, never going to bed angry with each other would in my experience have ruled out (the most torrid) makeup sex in the middle of the night.) Jimmy Carter certainly doesn't warrant criticism or judgment by a pipsqueak peasant in the public sphere like me. Just respect and gratitude for a lifetime of trying to do the right thing, one more every new day, all day long. Mr. and Mrs. Carter would agree with the sweet old man who, when asked when he began to serve Jesus, replied “This morning.” TJB