

# The right-wing legacy of Jimmy Carter

Patrick Martin

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The death of former President Jimmy Carter, at the age of 100, has become the occasion for his public canonization, as the corporate media, former and current US presidents Biden, Trump, Clinton and Bush, and a multitude of leaders of world capitalism join hands to praise Carter as an advocate of peace, human rights and aid to the poor and downtrodden.

Carter left office in January 1981, so more than half of all Americans, and far more than half of the world's population, have no memory of his presidency. They perhaps know something of his post-presidency, which combined humanitarian efforts in the poorest countries in the world—Habitat for Humanity, campaigns against guinea worm and other debilitating diseases—with occasional diplomatic missions on behalf of American imperialism.

The question for the working class is not to evaluate Carter as a human being in comparison to those who succeeded him in the White House. The downward curve is unmistakable, reflecting the decline of the American ruling class as a whole, culminating in the senile warmonger Biden and the demented fascist Trump.

The purpose of this brief review of the history of Carter's presidency is to make a Marxist assessment of a president who, like all the leaders of American imperialism, defended the interests of the capitalist ruling elite against its overseas enemies and, above all, against the working class at home.

Carter's four-year presidency was a critical transition point in American politics. It marked a definitive shift in the political trajectory of the Democratic Party, which was moving sharply to the right, breaking its association with the policies of limited social reform. These were begun under Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s and continued through the "Fair Deal" of Truman, the "New Frontier" of Kennedy and the "Great Society" of Lyndon Johnson, ending in the debacle of the Vietnam War in the 1960s.

The Nixon administration too was shipwrecked by the war in Vietnam, and the overall decline in the economic position of American capitalism, expressed most starkly in the ending of dollar-gold convertibility in August 1971. Nixon turned sharply against the working class, but he could not pursue efforts to suppress wages struggles and impose austerity as his administration disintegrated in the Watergate scandal. Nixon was forced to resign in August 1974, succeeded by Gerald Ford, his unelected vice president. Ford's pardon of Nixon and his inability to contain inflation led the ruling elite to seek a replacement who could, at least temporarily, provide some stability.

The federal government was widely discredited, not only by the Watergate break-in and cover-up that led to Nixon's resignation, but by a whole series of revelations of government criminality: the FBI's COINTELPRO program of illegal surveillance, provocation and even murder; the CIA assassinations and coup plots exposed in the Church committee investigation; the identification of the US government with such crimes as the military coup in Chile, in which tens of thousands of youth and workers were slaughtered.

Carter's function was to refurbish the bloodstained record of American imperialism, after decades of wars, coups and assassinations, with the ludicrous pretense that the foreign policy of the most powerful imperialist

nation would now be based on the defense of "human rights." At the same time, in the wake of the open criminality and corruption of the Nixon administration, Carter projected an image of piety and personal modesty and pledged to establish a government that would "never lie to you."

At the time he announced his candidacy for the US presidency, in late 1974, it would be no exaggeration to describe Carter as an entirely unknown quantity to the American public. A former aide recalled that Carter went on the popular quiz show "What's My Line?" and none of the panelists could identify him as the governor of Georgia.

His elevation to the Democratic presidential nomination was the product of a well-orchestrated effort in ruling circles. Carter was invited onto the Trilateral Commission, the panel financed by Chase Manhattan banker David Rockefeller and directed by fanatical anticommunist Professor Zbigniew Brzezinski to groom advocates for the policies demanded by the financial elite: fiscal austerity at home and bristling anti-Soviet militarism abroad.

Brzezinski became the foreign policy guru to the Democratic candidate and then held the position of National Security Advisor—previously occupied by Henry Kissinger—throughout Carter's term. There he spearheaded actions around the world that were the precursors of today's drive by American imperialism towards World War III.

The central focus was to prosecute the Cold War as aggressively as possible. It was Brzezinski who conceived the plan to turn Afghanistan into "Russia's Vietnam," a strategic disaster on the scale of that suffered by Washington in Southeast Asia, which would undermine the domestic stability of the Soviet Union. US military aid to Islamist guerrillas fighting the pro-Soviet government in Kabul ultimately triggered the reactionary Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, a process very similar to the US effort over the past decade that used NATO expansion to provoke the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

It was the Carter-Brzezinski foreign policy that brought Saudi multimillionaire Osama bin Laden to Afghanistan and gave birth to Al Qaeda and Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Brzezinski would later remark that "a few stirred-up Muslims" was a small price to pay for the collapse of the Soviet Union. As part of this anti-Soviet focus, Carter completed the Nixon-Kissinger rapprochement with China, giving China full diplomatic recognition in order to use Beijing against Moscow, which was then perceived as the greater threat to US world domination.

Much has been made in the past days' media blitz of Carter's role in brokering the 1979 Camp David Accords, which ended the most dangerous military threat to Israel by cementing a "peace" deal with Egypt. This gave Israel a free hand to carry out unrestricted attacks on the Palestinian people, a road that led straight to the ethnic cleansing of the West Bank by fascistic Jewish settlers and the ongoing genocide in Gaza.

Less has been said about Carter's announcement that any outside military threat to the Persian Gulf oil fields would be taken as a major national security challenge to the United States requiring American military intervention. The "Carter doctrine" was the US response to the Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the blood-soaked regime of the Shah, the main US ally along with Israel, in the Middle East. It set the stage for all the future American wars in the region, including the 1990-91

Persian Gulf War, launched by George H. W. Bush, and the 2003 invasion and conquest of Iraq, carried out by his son, George W. Bush.

All these plans, which prefigured in many ways the current focus of American imperialist foreign policy, were blown up by revolutionary upheavals. The most powerful blow came from the Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the regime of the Shah, who had ruled the country as an absolute monarch since the CIA-backed coup of 1953 overthrew the elected government of Mossadegh. The Shah's secret police, the Savak, had become a watchword for torture and murder.

Carter set aside his human rights rhetoric when it came to the Shah, since the despot was the American gendarme of the Middle East, along with Israel, using his military and oil power as a key imperialist ally. In one notorious incident, Carter was feted by the Shah at a banquet in Tehran on New Year's Eve of 1977. "Iran, because of the great leadership of the Shah, is an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world," Carter declared. "This is a great tribute to you, Your Majesty, and to your leadership and to the respect and the admiration and love which your people give to you." In barely a year, the Shah fled the country as millions took to the streets against him.

The US government could not crush the Iranian Revolution of February 1979 or even the Sandinista revolution in tiny Nicaragua in the same year, and Carter was compelled by mounting nationalist pressures in Panama to sign a treaty to return the Canal Zone by 1999. These were retreats made unavoidable by popular opposition at home to US military adventures, in the wake of Vietnam, but they were nonetheless denounced by the right wing of the Republican Party and became the basis of the election campaign of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

The final blow on this front, in the eyes of the US ruling elite, was the hostage confrontation with Iran, triggered by the decision, at the urging of Brzezinski and Kissinger, to admit the deposed Shah into the United States, supposedly for "medical treatment." Iranian students then stormed the US embassy in Tehran and seized US personnel, demanding the Shah be repatriated in exchange for the hostages, so that he could be tried for mass murder and other crimes against the Iranian people.

The crises in Iran and Afghanistan led to two important Carter decisions on national security policy. The first, made in the wake of a failed hostage rescue raid that ended in a helicopter crash in the Iranian desert in which eight soldiers died, was the creation of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). This is the counterterrorism force which now includes the Navy Seals, Army Rangers and other elite killer units. The second was the initiation of a worldwide campaign against the USSR, ranging from the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics to a massive strategic weapons buildup, which foreshadowed the policies carried out by the Reagan administration. So much for Carter the "peacemaker," as the *New York Times* headlined its obituary.

In domestic policy, the shifts inaugurated under Carter were in many ways even more consequential than those in foreign policy, although these must be summarized more briefly. Carter was a fiscal conservative, who told aides he was closer to the Republican Party than to the Democrats on such issues. His administration balked at any significant expansion of the social programs established in the 1960s, such as Medicare and Medicaid, and there was no longer any pretense of a "war on poverty."

Instead, Carter embraced conventional, right-wing "free market" economics, including the deregulation of key sections of the economy, beginning with the airlines, the trucking industry, the railroads and natural gas production and distribution. In this he was following the same path as Margaret Thatcher in Britain who came to power in 1979, J. R. Jayawardene in Sri Lanka (1977), and other ruling class politicians throughout the world, as they responded to the global crisis of capitalism.

Emphasizing the strategic need for the United States to cut its energy costs and dependence on oil imports, in the wake of the Arab oil embargo of 1973-74, the Carter administration sided with the coal companies in

their assault on the coal miners, which sparked a 111-day strike by more than 160,000 members of the United Mine Workers. In March 1978, as the strike ended its third month, Carter issued a back-to-work order under the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Law. The miners defied the order, and Carter could not enforce it, even after calling out the National Guard. Only the betrayals by the UMW and AFL-CIO leaders finally imposed a settlement and ended the strike.

The Trotskyist movement in the United States, then known as the Workers League, predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party, fought energetically to alert the working class to the dangers of the Carter administration, particularly in the course of the coal miners' strike, when the *Bulletin*, the party's newspaper, was widely circulated in the coal fields. It was so influential that, according to one UMW official, at a meeting in the White House, the president brandished a copy of the *Bulletin* and expressed outrage that it contained details of contract proposals that Carter and the coal companies were seeking to impose.

Remarkably, there is not even a mention of the coal miners' strike and the failed invocation of Taft-Hartley in the lengthy obituaries of Carter published in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, which set the tone for the adulatory coverage in the media as a whole. But the experience of the 1977-78 strike was decisive, both in alienating large sections of the working class, particularly throughout Appalachia, from the Democratic Party, and in the loss of political confidence in Carter on the part of the corporate ruling elite.

The shift to the right under Carter accelerated after his failure to crush the miners. Wall Street demanded measures that would suppress working class militancy and make possible a frontal assault on the social gains made by American workers in the period from the 1930s to the 1970s. To spearhead this social assault, Carter brought in banker Paul Volcker to head the Federal Reserve Board in August 1979. Volcker pushed up interest rates to an unheard of 20 percent, throwing the US economy into recession. Price inflation at the grocery store and the gas pump, particularly driven by the Middle East crises, was combined with rapidly rising unemployment.

At the same time, Carter enlisted the trade union bureaucracy in the first major exercise in corporatism, the federal bailout of Chrysler Corporation. UAW President Douglas Fraser was brought onto the company's board of directors, and the union pushed through cuts in wages, pensions and other benefits under the rubric of "saving jobs." This was the starting point of the transformation of the unions from workers' organizations, however limited and bureaucratized, into the industrial police force for big business which they are today.

In the course of this process, Carter gave the green light to the drafting of plans for smashing the air traffic controllers' union PATCO, although because of his electoral defeat in 1980, the actual destruction of the union, avenging the humiliation of the government by the coal miners, was carried out by Reagan. This set the stage for the anti-labor rampage of broken and betrayed strikes throughout the 1980s.

It is this history, of four of the most consequential years in the class struggle, globally and within the United States, that must inform any evaluation of the Carter administration. This review underscores the central political issue facing the American working class today, as it did during Carter's presidency: the urgent necessity of breaking free of the political straitjacket of the Democratic Party and the whole corporate-controlled two-party system, and establishing its political independence through the building of a mass movement of the working class for socialism.



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