

5 Moments That Defined Jimmy Carter's Presidency

The 39th president faced diplomatic challenges abroad and tough economic prospects at home during his term from 1977 to 1981.

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Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter receives applause at the House of Lords in London on Feb. 3, 2016. Neil Hall-WPA Pool/Getty Images



Former President Jimmy Carter died at his home in Plains, Georgia, on Dec. 29, at the age of 100. His life spanned a career of public service, including a single term as president from 1977 to 1981.

While Carter continued to build on a legacy of humanitarian work after leaving public office, his presidential term was marked by efforts to deal with inflation and a domestic energy crisis. On the international front, the 39th U.S. president sought to expand diplomacy with Russia and China and to advance peace in the Middle East.

Camp David

Carter's foreign policy efforts included pushing to improve relations between Israel and its neighbors.

Normalizing diplomatic relations between Israel and Egypt became a central focus of his Middle East peace policy.

Complicating the process were internal pressures in the respective countries of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Amid signs Sadat would pull back from talks with Israel, Carter called a summit at the presidential retreat in Camp David, Maryland.

Carter, Sadat, and Begin met for 12 days in September 1978. The parties deliberated over Israeli–Egyptian relations and the challenges of Palestinian self-government.

The Camp David meetings yielded two accords: one outlining a general Israeli–Egyptian peace and a second describing a plan for Palestinian governance in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Israeli–Egyptian peace framework set the stage for a treaty between the two countries in March 1979.

The framework for Palestinian governance, on the other hand, met resistance from Palestinian activists who were not a party to the negotiations, as well as from the [United Nations](#). The Israeli–Palestinian conflict continues to this day.

SALT II and Russia

During his presidency, Carter sought to expand nuclear arms control measures between the United States and the Soviet Union in the hope of decreasing the risk of nuclear conflict in the Cold War era.

The United States and the Soviet Union held a set of Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) in November 1969. These talks led to an interim agreement halting new nuclear arms production on either side and paved the way for the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 1972.

A second set of arms control negotiations, known as SALT II, continued from 1972 until 1979. Carter had hoped to produce further arms control measures from SALT II.

Carter and Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev eventually signed the SALT II treaty in Vienna, Austria, in June 1979. The agreement called for specific limits on the number of nuclear weapons delivery vehicles either side could have.

Carter submitted SALT II to the Senate for ratification but withdrew it in January 1980 following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Despite not ratifying the treaty, Carter indicated the United States would abide by its terms so long as the Soviet Union did the same.

Following the Soviet invasion, Carter helped organize an international boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympics in Moscow.

One China

Carter's efforts to improve relations between the United States and China saw him solidify the regime's aims to assert greater power across the Taiwan Strait.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) considers Taiwan to be a part of China. Taiwan, by contrast, has maintained de facto independence from the Chinese mainland and governs itself as the Republic of China (ROC).

The 37th president, Richard Nixon, put the United States on a path to normalizing relations with the CCP when he visited China in February 1972. During his 1972 visit, Nixon [said](#), "There is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China."

Expanding on Nixon's 1972 visit, Carter [formalized](#) U.S. diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC), recognizing it as the sole legal government of China. He also withdrew the official U.S. recognition of the ROC government.

While recognizing the PRC as the legitimate government of China, Carter insisted the United States would maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan. He reiterated Nixon's call for mainland China and Taiwan to resolve their differences through peaceful means.

Carter also signed the Taiwan Relations Act, which, among other things, has allowed for continued arms sales from the United States to Taiwan.

Since formalizing relations with China, the United States has maintained a policy of strategic ambiguity toward Taiwan. Though successive U.S. presidential administrations have urged a peaceful resolution to the sovereignty dispute, they've left it unclear whether the United States would intervene if China moves to take over Taiwan by force.

Crisis of Confidence

At home, Carter's presidency was troubled by high inflation and interest rates, unemployment, and persistent energy shortages throughout the 1970s.

Carter formed the Department of Energy in 1977, hoping to consolidate existing U.S. energy regulatory agencies and better address energy crises.

Despite his efforts, energy and economic challenges persisted throughout Carter's presidency. In a July 1979 address, he acknowledged the persistent issues troubling Americans.

“It's clear that the true problems of our Nation are much deeper—deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession,” Carter [said](#). “And I realize more than ever that as President, I need your help.”

Carter went on to say that the United States was facing a “crisis of confidence” that threatened the nation's social and political fabric.

While he tried to rally Americans in his July 1979 address, Carter continued to struggle for support.

Historic [polling data](#) from Gallup shows Carter faced lengthy stretches of negative approval ratings throughout the second half of his presidential term. Then, Sen. Ted Kennedy (D-Mass.) launched a primary challenge against Carter, seeking to replace him as the Democratic Party's 1980 presidential nominee.

Iran Hostages

Throughout the final year of his presidency, Carter had to contend with a worsening diplomatic situation in Iran.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, was ousted from power in the Iranian Revolution and went into exile in the early months of 1979, leaving U.S.–Iranian relations in turmoil. The Carter administration allowed the Iranian leader to enter the United States for medical

treatment in October 1979, but the move further angered Iran's Shia Islamic revolutionaries.

Supporters of the Iranian Revolution stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on Nov. 4, 1979, and took 52 Americans hostage.

Carter initially backed negotiations for the release of the hostages but eventually began to support a rescue mission led by U.S. special operations forces. By April of 1980, the Carter administration had chosen a rescue plan dubbed "Operation Eagle Claw." The mission entailed a planned rendezvous in the desert involving eight Navy helicopters and six transport aircraft. However, a sandstorm caused visibility issues and hydraulic problems for the aircraft. A helicopter collided with a parked cargo plane full of fuel, setting off an explosion and fire that took the lives of eight U.S. troops. Carter granted a request to abort the mission and pull the rescue teams back.

After the failed mission, the Carter administration resumed negotiations but couldn't find a quick resolution.

Ronald Reagan **defeated** Carter in the 1980 election by nine percentage points, winning 48 states and 489 electoral votes to Carter's 49. Iran finally turned over the American hostages on Jan. 20, 1981, as Carter left office and Reagan was sworn in.

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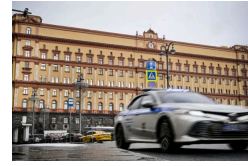
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