

Jimmy Carter, Israel and the Apartheid Question

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*The late centenarian, **Jimmy Carter**, occupied a difficult position in the line of imperial magistrates we know as US Presidents. Coming to power in the aftermath of murderous US adventurism in Indochina and the debauching of the presidency by Richard Nixon (“when the president does it, it means that it is not illegal”), he took an axe to the welfare state, nourished the strapping, dangerous creature that would become neoliberalism, and made foreign policy decisions of disastrous consequence, punctuated by such successes as normalising relations between Egypt and Israel.*

This record was marked by the gold plating of human rights, intended as the acme of foreign policy but bound to be scratched. While Carter found it easy to niggle the Soviet Union about the mistreatment of its citizens, approaches varied depending on region and circumstance. His Central American record was more than patchy, finely characterised by aid to El Salvador’s military dictatorship. A [plea penned](#) by San Salvador archbishop Óscar Romero to Carter on February 17, 1980, asking that Washington cease such aid, fell on deaf ears. On March 24, 1980, Romero was slain during mass by gunmen trained by US personnel.

The subsequent period following his one term in office (1977-1981) could be seen as a lengthy phase of atonement, realised through the charitable ventures of the non-profit Carter Center and the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

“Rejected by the voters in 1980,” [writes](#) historian John Whiteclay Chambers II, “he was at best an average president; yet Carter has emerged as perhaps America’s greatest ex-president with his strengths generally outweighing his weaknesses.”

Beyond his stint in office, the tongue worked more easily, and opinions expressed with greater ease. Over time, for instance, he frowned with matronly disapproval at Israel over its treatment of Palestinians. Having been central to creating the framework that led to the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty of 1979, for which he was admired by Israeli officials and diplomats, he came to be seen by critics as walking off the reservation in [Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid](#).

“Israel’s continued control and colonization of Palestinian land,” he wrote, “have been the primary obstacles to a comprehensive peace agreement in the Holy Land.”

The 2006 publication did what was then the unmentionable: relate two situations previously seen as non sequiturs in argument. Apartheid had been considered an exceptional racial experiment of separation imposed by a South African white supremacist government upon its non-white subjects. How could it be said that an enlightened Israel could be doing the same thing to its Palestinian subjects, especially in the West Bank? From Carter’s viewpoint,

such features as the building of the West Bank wall, ongoing expansion of Israel's illegal settlements on occupied Palestinian territory, onerous impositions on Palestinian movement and the denial of direct access points, and the saturating presence of military checkpoints, yielded a clear enough answer.

From the groves of academe to chat shows and the think tank circuit, reaction to this prescient, albeit uneven work, was one of hysteria. A [review](#) in the *Mediterranean Quarterly*, to take one example of academic tittering, dismisses the use of "apartheid" as merely "one of the current themes of the anti-Israel propaganda machine."

Fourteen members of the Carter Center advisory board resigned in a huff.

"It seems you have turned to a world of advocacy, even malicious advocacy," they scoldingly [wrote in a letter](#) to the former president. "We can no longer endorse your strident and uncompromising position."

Deborah Lipstadt, currently President Joe Biden's Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism, [condescendingly wrote](#) that the book "ignores a legacy of mistreatment, expulsion and murder committed against Jews. It trivialises the murder of Israelis." It wallowed in the Palestinian refugee experience, yet only made "two fleeting references to the Holocaust."

The Holocaust, as with so many apologists for Israeli policies, is the crutch and excuse for bad behaviour. Privileged victimhood comes with its perks. If criticism is made of this credo, then the person must be antisemitic. Ditto if that same person makes any reference to funding lobbies and publicity relations attempting to silence dissent from the glossy Israeli narrative. This latter point was frequently made by the Anti-Defamation League, which attacked Carter's book for propagating "myths like Jewish control of the government and media."

Lipstadt's reasoning is telling and finds hideous form in Israel's current defence of its brutal policies against the Palestinians of Gaza and the West Bank. Before the International Court of Justice defending its position against claims of genocide made by South Africa, Israel's legal representatives reasoned, in essence, that the country's retaliation for being attacked on October 7, 2023 by Hamas negated any accusation that its military methods could ever be genocidal. The shadow of the Holocaust was cast so long, it could exonerate the current practices that have left over 45,000 Palestinians dead and the processes of displacement and destruction more vigorous than ever.

Whatever the faults of his book, Carter's overall sense that apartheid's symptoms were present has stormed the citadels of legal and human rights debate. In this year's [advisory opinion sought](#) by the UN General Assembly in 2023, the ICJ found that the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, along with "the regime associated with them, have been established and are being maintained in violation of international law."

This involved policies and practices of imposed separation between the Palestinian populace and Israeli settlers that had been "transferred" into the territories. Such a regime was physical and juridical, breaching Article 3 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CERD). The Convention expressly condemns both racial segregation and apartheid, with state parties undertaking to prevent, prohibit and eradicate such practices in territories under their control.

In Israel, the human rights activist organisation B'Tselem [has explicitly accepted](#) the premise, but gone further than Carter, whose concerns of developing apartheid only extended to Israeli treatment of Palestinians in the occupied territories. "The Israeli regime enacts in all the territory it controls (Israeli sovereign territory, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip) an apartheid regime."

In his last days, Carter did witness a change of heart from some former critics. Steve Berman, one of the resignations from the Carter Center in response to the book, [opined](#) in *Forward* that America's Jewry "should apologize to Jimmy Carter, and thank him for everything he has done for us and the world." Over time, Berman "came to realize that the Jewish state was indeed burying its head in the sand. Israel was not facing the demographic realities, and was fast becoming a state that could not be both democratic and Jewish." He pondered Carter's warning that Israel's future lay in apartheid if its "leadership kept ignoring the general direction of the country." How tides can change.

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