

Jimmy Carter Told Trump How to Put America First, But Will He Do It?

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Global Research, December 30, 2024

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#)

*With **President Jimmy Carter's** passing and **Donald Trump** about to return to the White House, it's a good time to recall a phone conversation that Carter had with Trump during his first term. Carter's advice would serve Trump well if he really wants to fulfill his campaign promise to Put America First—something he failed to do in his first term.*

In April 2019, Jimmy Carter told his church congregation in Georgia that President Trump had [called him](#) for advice about China. Carter said he told Trump that China was economically overtaking the United States as the world's largest and most dynamic economy because the United States had spent decades wasting trillions of dollars to fight endless wars, while China had instead focused on economic development and [lifted](#) hundreds of millions of its people out of extreme poverty.

“China has not wasted a single penny on war,” Carter said, “and that’s why they’re ahead of us, in almost every way.”

The next day, the White House confirmed that the two presidents “had a very good telephone conversation about President Trump’s stance on trade with China and numerous other topics.”

Some of Trump’s statements during the election campaign suggest that he hasn’t forgotten Carter’s advice. At the very least, he got the message that peace would be good for America, and that a lot of Americans understand that. Majorities of Americans have long supported a [ceasefire in Gaza](#), and a [plurality](#) now support a negotiated peace in Ukraine, too. Trump promised to deliver on both. He even said that he would end the war in Ukraine in [24 hours](#), based on his good relations with leaders in Russia and Ukraine.

Americans may be more worried about problems closer to home than the Middle East or Ukraine, but President Carter connected the dots between U.S. war-making and our quality of life in America.

“And I think the difference is, if you take \$3 trillion and put it in American infrastructure, you’d probably have \$2 trillion leftover,” Carter [explained](#) to his congregation. “We’d have high-speed railroad. We’d have bridges that aren’t collapsing, we’d have roads that are maintained properly. Our education system would be as good as that of say South Korea or Hong Kong.”

What Carter described to Trump is the classic choice between “guns and butter” that faces every society. In the late 19th and early 20th century, the United States was a rising economic power, like China today. Europe’s imperial powers destroyed each other in the First World War, leaving even the victors, Britain and France, with [multibillion](#) dollar debts to

J.P. Morgan and the U.S. Treasury. The United States' economic success made it the world's banker and industrial leader and gave it a decisive role in the history of the 20th century.

Today, it is the United States that has an unprecedented national debt of \$36 trillion, and our military budget [consumes](#) 56% of federal discretionary spending, putting the squeeze on all our other needs. But we can still enjoy shared prosperity and a brighter future if Trump can do as Carter advised him and wean our government off its addiction to war.

So why are we not reassured by Trump's promises to make peace and put America first? There are three things that worry us: his first-term track record; his second-term cabinet picks; and his aggressive rhetoric since the election (as opposed to what he said on the campaign trail).

Let's start with his track record. Despite loud promises to tackle the entrenched interests of the "Deep State" and to "Drain the Swamp," Trump's first term was four years of Christmas Days for billionaires and corporate interests, starting with the military-industrial complex. In FY2025 inflation-adjusted dollars, Trump spent an average of \$292 billion per year on Pentagon "[investment](#)" accounts, or payments to weapons makers and other military suppliers. That was a 24% increase over Obama's second term.

Trump's record tax giveaway to his billionaire buddies was not balanced by any cuts in military spending, which was as much of a sacred cow to him as to Bush, Obama and Biden. This toxic combination blew up the national debt, leaving nothing in the kitty for improving education, healthcare, public transportation or any of our society's other critical needs. That tax cut will expire in a year's time, but Trump has [made it clear](#) that he intends to give even greater tax breaks to his billionaire buddies.

Trump deserves credit for not starting any new wars during his first term, but his escalations of Bush's and Obama's wars made his first year in office in 2017 the heaviest year of U.S. and allied bombing since the First Gulf War in 1991, [dropping](#) more than 60,000 bombs and missiles on Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Pakistan and Somalia.

Many Americans remember Trump's shocking statement that "When you get these terrorists, you have to take out their families." What the U.S. corporate media swept under the rug was that the Iraqi forces who captured the bombed out ruins of Islamic State's stronghold in Mosul's Old City took Trump at his word and killed all the [survivors](#), including women and children, just as Israel [is doing](#) in parts of Gaza today. Maybe now Trump can understand that normalizing war crimes only leads to more war crimes, not to peace or stability.

When it comes to Trump's new cabinet picks, he might have jettisoned some of the worst hawks in his last coterie, such as **John Bolton**, but some of his nominees for top foreign policy jobs are awful, including Secretary of State nominee [Marco Rubio](#), National Security Advisor nominee [Mike Waltz](#) and Secretary of Defense nominee [Pete Hegseth](#).

Tulsi Gabbard is a more encouraging choice as National Intelligence Director, but as a House member, she voted for two thirds of Obama's and Trump's military spending bills, and was always a pushover for expensive new weapon systems. As [we asked](#) when she ran for president in 2020, which Tulsi Gabbard will we see in her new job? The one who opposes regime change wars and the new Cold War with Russia, or the one who couldn't say no to nuclear-armed cruise missiles in 2014, 2015 or 2016? And who will Trump listen to? Tulsi

Gabbard and [JD Vance](#), who is more non-interventionist, or warmongers Rubio and Waltz?

We don't want to place too much stock in Trump's often contradictory public statements, but he has sounded very hawkish lately. If you believe everything Trump says, he wants to buy Greenland, invade Mexico to fight immigrants and drug gangs, annex Canada as the 51st state, put 25% tariffs on Canada and Mexico, and seize the Panama Canal and close it to China. In Trump's last term he badgered NATO countries to increase their military spending to 2 percent of GDP, but now he is calling on them to spend a staggering [5 percent](#), far more than the 3.1 percent of GDP that the U.S. spent in 2024.

This is a test for the American people. Do we want a showman, tough guy president, playing ringmaster of the corporate media circus? Do we want a leader who threatens to invade Canada, Mexico, Panama (again) and Greenland, like an American Netanyahu dreaming of a Western Greater Israel? Or should we demand a president who really puts America First? A president who makes peace in Ukraine and the Middle East? A president who finally starts bringing our troops home from those 800 foreign military bases all over the world? A president who can look at a map and see that Guantanamo is in Cuba and the Golan Heights are in Syria?

As Jimmy Carter told Trump, by making peace and renouncing war and militarism he can actually put America First, save trillions of dollars and invest in America. The Democrats have had their chances to do right by the American people and they've blown it so many times we've lost count. So the ball's in Trump's court. Will he follow Carter's sage advice?

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Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J. S. Davies are the authors of [War in Ukraine: Making Sense of a Senseless Conflict](#), published by OR Books, with an updated edition due in March 2025. They are regular contributors to Global Research.

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