

The Blood-Soaked Legacy of the Jimmy Carter Administration

Part Two

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO](#)

[War Agenda](#)

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Five months ago, I wrote an article titled "[Jimmy Carter's Blood-Soaked Legacy](#)" about how the former President's record in office contradicted his professed concern for human rights. Despite campaigning on a [promise](#) to make respect for human rights a central tenet of the conduct of American foreign policy, Carter's actions consistently prioritized economic and security interests over humanitarian concerns.

I cited the examples of Carter's administration providing aid to Zairian dictator Mobutu to crush southern African liberation movements; financially supporting the Guatemalan military junta, and looking the other way as Israel gave them weapons and training; ignoring calls from human rights activists to withdraw support from the Suharto dictatorship in Indonesia as they carried out genocide in East Timor; refusing to pursue sanctions against South Africa in the United Nations after the South African Defence Forces bombed a refugee camp in Angola, killing 600 refugees; financing and arming mujahideen rebels to destabilize the government of Afghanistan and draw the Soviet Union into invading the country; and providing aid to the military dictatorship in El Salvador, despite a letter from Archbishop Oscar Romero - who was assassinated by a member of a government death squad weeks later - explicitly calling for Carter not to do so.

This list was not meant to be exhaustive, but merely to highlight some of the most prominent contradictions between Carter's ideals and his actions. After subsequent research and reader feedback, I realized there were many examples I had not mentioned. Their significance to the history of American foreign policy, and the repercussions they produced, is worth exploring in a subsequent analysis.

Carter announced in early December that he is [cancer free](#). Sadly, that news was followed shortly thereafter by the tragic, premature death of his 28-year-old grandson. But Carter seems to have maintained his positivity. He has kept up his public schedule and says that healthwise he [still feels good](#).

A person's record and legacy should be debated while they are still alive - rather than after they are gone, when nostalgia or reluctance to speak ill of the dead can easily lead to embellishment and historical revisionism. And a person should be able to defend himself and his actions. Otherwise, it is merely an academic exercise instead of a demand for accountability. In this spirit, I present six more foreign policy positions that demonstrate Carter's prioritization of American political and economic hegemony over actual support for

human rights while he held the highest office in the United States.

Vietnam

Article 21 of the [Paris Agreement in 1973](#) stipulated that:

“the United States will contribute to healing the wounds of war and to postwar reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and throughout Indochina.”

When asked in 1977 if the United States had a moral obligation to help rebuild Vietnam, Carter [responded](#) that:

“The destruction was mutual. You know, we went to Vietnam without any desire to capture territory or to impose American will on other people. We went there to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese. And I don’t feel that we ought to apologize or to castigate ourselves or to assume the status of culpability.”

The United States went to Vietnam after they could not convince the French to further continue a war to recolonize Vietnam. The Geneva Accords reached between France and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1954 called for a temporary division of Vietnam pending unification, which was to take place after national elections two years later.

In 1955, the Eisenhower administration began granting direct aid and providing American military advisers to the Bao Dai monarchy. Ngo Dinh Diem assumed control later that year through a fraudulent election. Knowing he would be trounced by the Communist party, he declined to participate in reunification elections called for by the peace agreement..

The United States government was indispensable to the survival of the Diem regime – and after complicity in Diem’s assassination, the Theiu regime. They funded and organized the police, military and intelligence services and were complicit in the reign of terror they unleashed on the South Vietnamese. Throughout the military dictatorship, tens of thousands of people were imprisoned without charges or trial; tortured and held in notorious [Tiger Cages](#); assassinated extrajudicially; and displaced forcibly from their homes and transferred to concentration camps as American forces “helped to defend the freedom of the South Vietnamese.”

The South Vietnamese people are still suffering from the refusal to grant reparations for the devastation wrought by the U.S. military. More 100,000 Vietnamese have been killed or injured (an average of 2,500 per year) due to land mines and other ordnance dropped on Vietnam that did not explode on impact.

Residents also still suffer the horrific after effects of chemical weapons. The U.S. military sprayed millions of gallons of chemical defoliants, including Agent Orange, throughout South Vietnam. The [President’s Cancer Panel](#) in 2010 determined that “(a)pproximately 4.8 million Vietnamese people were exposed to Agent Orange, resulting in 400,000 deaths and disabilities and a half million children born with birth defects.”

Had Carter not so flippantly dismissed the U.S.’s role in the destruction of Vietnam and

recognized its responsibility to uphold their obligation to pay reparations, likely tens of thousands of lives may have been saved with funds that could have been used for demining, and the cleanup and treatment of chemical agents that have gone on spreading the horrors of war for decades after the fighting ended.

Nicaragua

“Carter Must End Aid To Somoza,” proclaimed an editorial in [The Harvard Crimson](#) in September 1978. The paper demanded that the U.S. government cut off all forms of aid to the dictatorship of Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza, who was using indiscriminate force to try to crush a popular revolutionary movement to oust him, so the Nicaraguan people could choose their own manner of governance.

William Blum writes in [Killing Hope](#) that with the Somoza regime on the verge of collapse, “Carter authorized covert CIA support for the press and labor unions in Nicaragua in an attempt to create a ‘moderate’ alternative to the Sandinistas.” The Carter administration’s plan, according to Blum, was to allow the Somoza regime to take part in a new government, while leaving the state’s military and security institutions largely intact.

The Sandinistas were victorious in July 1981, as Somoza was forced to flee the country in disgrace. They were able to dismantle the dictatorship and create a new revolutionary government.

The meddling and funding for opposition organizations by the Carter administration, however, would pale in comparison to the full-scale terrorism and aggression that would follow under Ronald Reagan, who had by then taken over as President.

Cambodia

Starting in March 1969, President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger waged a massive, secret bombing campaign (Operation Menu) on Cambodia in which the U.S. military was instructed “anything that flies on anything that moves.”

The American aggression likely caused [higher](#) than official estimates of 150,000 Cambodian civilian deaths. When the operation was discovered by a Congressional Committee, it was not even included in the impeachment articles against Nixon, much less used as a basis to refer Nixon and Kissinger for prosecution for war crimes.

Radicalized, destitute and shell-shocked by the destruction wrought by the American bombing, Pol Pot and his previously marginal Khmer Rouge were able to rally enough recruits to seize control of the government in 1975.

It is generally accepted that the Khmer Rouge’s massacres in the Killing Fields and drastic measures to create a primitive agrarian society amounted to genocide. On the high end, two million deaths is a common number – though that number has likely been highly inflated for anti-Communist propaganda purposes. The American establishment and media were loudly outspoken against Khmer Rouge atrocities, especially considering the near unanimous silence regarding the nearly simultaneous genocide by the Indonesian military taking place in East Timor.

But, strangely, after a Vietnamese invasion in 1978 ousted them, the Khmer Rouge lost their

status as evil Communists, as the official American foreign policy narrative recast them as victims of Vietnamese aggression.

The Carter administration began supporting the Khmer Rouge, who had been relegated to remote rural sections of the country, by financial and diplomatic means. Carter's national security adviser [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#) reportedly told an American journalist he "encouraged the Chinese to support Pol Pot... Pol Pot was an abomination. We could never support him, but China could."

According to columnist [William Pfaff](#), financial support started by the Carter administration and continued by the Reagan administration to the Khmer Rouge totaled more than \$15 million annually.

Despite the fact they had been driven from power, with [American support](#) the Khmer Rouge managed to maintain their UN seat – as the Carter administration had refused to recognize the government installed after the Vietnamese invasion.

The remnants of the Khmer Rouge fought a guerilla war until Pot's death in 1998. There is no precise count of the dead and injured that resulted from the fighting so long after the regime was ousted, but it is known that hundreds of thousands of people were displaced from their homes and became refugees.

The Carter administration's decision to fan the flames of violence for frivolous reasons – mainly to punish Vietnam for their defeat of American forces five years earlier – was a scandalous example of vindictiveness.

South Korea

In December 1979, the South Korean military led by General Chun Doo Hwan led a *coup d'état* in which Chun imprisoned potential military rivals and cleared the way to his succession as dictator. On May 17, 1980, Chun declared martial law across the country. The next day, popular protests emerged in the city of Kwangju in opposition.

Chun's support from the United States would be crucial to maintain legitimacy as he brought in the military to crush the uprising.

"The White House had tacitly shelved President Carter's human rights campaign in its anxiety that nothing should 'unravel and cause chaos in a key American ally,'" writes [The Guardian](#).

"It agreed to continue supporting thuggish General Chun Doo Hwan, a major figure behind the coup who was by now imposing stringent military rule."

Journalist [Tim Shorrock](#) studied more than 3,500 documents obtained by FOIA request and determined that more than mere complicity, the Carter administration played a "significant background advisory role in the violent 1980 military crackdown that triggered the May 18 citizens' uprising."

William Gleysteen, who Carter had personally appointed ambassador to South Korea, told Chun the U.S. would not object if he were to use the military to quell large-scale student protests.

Shorrock notes that declassified documents show that:

U.S. officials in Seoul and Washington knew Mr. Chun's contingency plans included deployment of Korean Special Warfare Command troops, trained to fight behind the lines in a war against North Korea. The 'Black Beret' Special Forces, who were not under U.S. command, were modeled after the U.S. Green Berets and had a history dating back to their participation alongside American troops in the Vietnam War.

On May 22, Shorrock writes, "the Carter administration approved further use of force to retake the city and agreed to provide short-term support to Mr. Chun if he agreed to long-term political change."

The Special Warfare troops carried out a massacre in which officially 200 people were killed, but estimates place the likely number of victims 10 times higher. Chun continued ruling as a dictator until 1988.

The George H. W. Bush administration would whitewash American involvement during the 1980 uprising by claiming the U.S. government had no knowledge of the use of the Korean special forces and did not approve of any such actions. Chun's dictatorship in South Korea would continue until popular protests were able to force democratic elections in 1988.

Philippines

In September 1972, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in Proclamation No. 1081. It would not be lifted until three days before the end of Jimmy Carter's tenure as President in 1981.

This would not prevent the Carter administration from continuing the billions of dollars provided by the U.S. government to the Marcos dictatorship in military aid. As he had with Indonesian Major General and President Suharto, Carter kept the spigot flowing to a dictator who demonstrated not just lack of respect, but outright hostility to the human rights of his subjects.

The *quid pro quo* in the Philippines was a Military Bases Agreement agreed to in December 1978. The Filipino-American socialist newspaper the [Katipunan](#) said that after signing the agreement, the Carter administration ignored Marcos's many human rights violations.

"Especially now, in light of renewed threats to its imperialist hegemony of the world, the Carter administration has made it very clear that such considerations as human rights, democracy, etc., take a back seat, to the protection of American global interests, insofar as U.S.-R.P. relations are concerned," the paper wrote in April 1980.

The *Katipunan* said that political considerations led Carter's State Department to reverse their previous condemnation to claim the Marcos regime was improving its record. "The State Department might as well have congratulated Marcos for torture, salvaging, mass arrests, indefinite detention, etc.," they wrote.

The Middle East

No one is more responsible for the vast proliferation of foreign U.S. military bases – now about 800, compared to about 30 for the rest of the world combined – than Jimmy Carter.

Any rational geopolitical analysis of the post-war period until Carter's presidency would have concluded the Soviet Union had absolutely no intention of military expansion beyond their immediate satellite states. But Carter – like each of his predecessors since World War II – was delusional in his imagination of a Soviet threat behind every corner. His anti-communist, Cold-War strategy called for a military presence everywhere American economic interests existed. Using the phantom "Soviet threat," Carter laid out what became known as the Carter Doctrine.

"In his January 1980 State of the Union address, President Jimmy Carter announced a policy change that rivaled Roosevelt's destroyers for bases deal in its significance for the nation and the world," writes anthropologist David Vine in [Base Nation: How U.S. Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World](#). "Carter soon launched what became one of the greatest base construction efforts in history. The Middle East buildup soon approached the size and scope of the Cold War garrisoning of Western Europe and the profusion of bases built to wage wars in Korea and Vietnam. U.S. bases sprang up in Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere in the region to host a 'Rapid Deployment Force,' which was to stand permanent guard over Middle Eastern petroleum supplies."

Post-Presidency

In my first article on Carter's legacy, I wrote that he has – by far – the most impressive record of any American President after leaving office. I cited the examples of his condemnations of Israel's policies in the occupied Palestinian territories and his Carter Center's work independently verifying voting systems and electoral processes – specifically their endorsement of Venezuela's 2013 election – as invaluable accomplishments for social justice.

Since then, Carter has bolstered his already impressive post-Presidency record even more. First, Carter told [Oprah Winfrey](#) in a September interview that:

"We've become now an oligarchy instead of a democracy. And I think that's been the worst damage to the basic moral and ethical standards of the American political system that I've ever seen in my life."

His summation of the state of the American sociopolitical system is both precise and brutally honest. While [academic studies](#) have already reached the same conclusion, Carter putting the issue in simple terms for a mainstream audience demonstrates his willingness to take on matters that would be considered taboo for the rest of the elite class. We can hope that the impact of his statement will be similar to his calling Israeli rule over Palestinians apartheid, something also taboo among elites at the time but increasingly gaining currency in mainstream discourse.

In October, Carter wrote an Op-Ed in the [New York Times](#) calling for "A Five-Nation Plan to End the Syrian Crisis." Carter writes that since the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the Carter Center had explained to Washington that the Obama administration's demand for Bashar al-Assad's removal would preclude the achievement of a political solution.

Meetings with Russian President Vladimir Putin led Carter to believe that a peace proposal

endorsed by the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia would gain enough support among the Syrian parties to end the fighting.

“The involvement of Russia and Iran is essential. Mr. Assad’s only concession in four years of war was giving up chemical weapons, and he did so only under pressure from Russia and Iran. Similarly, he will not end the war by accepting concessions imposed by the West, but is likely to do so if urged by his allies,” Carter writes.

The peace plan that Secretary of State John Kerry essentially copied from Russia – and has now endorsed as his own at the [United Nations](#) – looks very much like that laid out by Carter. There is good reason to think that if the Obama administration had not stubbornly ignored Carter’s advice four years ago – when they still believed, before Russia’s military intervention on Assad’s behalf, that they could overthrow the regime by force through proxy groups like the [CIA-backed Free Syrian Army](#) – the unimaginable violence and devastation could have been largely avoided.

While in power, Carter and the officials he hand-picked to serve in his administration acted with the same Cold War zeal as their predecessors to relentlessly combat – with overwhelming force and the power of the U.S. government’s diplomatic muscle- threats to global corporate capitalist dominance, both real and imagined.

What accounts for the discrepancy between Carter’s actions in and out of office is a matter of speculation. Was it merely a change of heart? A reflection of the nature of authority? Or of the limits of the office of President and its subordination to the power of unelected, entrenched bureaucracy?

The bottom line is that, unfortunately, when Carter was afforded the opportunity to change the direction of U.S. foreign policy after receiving a mandate from the American voters, he was unable or unwilling to do so. We can only hope this missed opportunity will not be the last.

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