



Presidents of the United States

James E. Carter

Born: October 1, 1924, Plains, Georgia.

Occupation: Farmer, engineer, scientist, businessman.

Wife: Rosalyn Smith. Children: Three boys, one girl.

President: 1977-1981. Democratic party.

Vice-President: Walter F. Mondale.



James Earl Carter served from 1977 to 1981 as the 39th president of the United States. Born on Oct. 1, 1924, in Plains, Ga., he attended Georgia Tech and the U.S. Naval Academy, from which he graduated in 1946. He married Rosalynn Smith on July 7, 1946, and they had four children. Carter served in the navy as an engineer working with nuclear-powered submarines. After the death of his father, however, he resigned (1953) his commission to manage the family's peanut-farming business. He was a state senator (1962-66) and ran unsuccessfully for governor of Georgia in 1966. In his second attempt (1970), Carter was elected governor and served one term (1971-75).

In 1972, Carter began a 4-year campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. In 1976 he established a commanding lead over other candidates by winning the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. He established a solid base in the South and among black voters and went on to win the Democratic party nomination. For his running mate he chose a liberal, Sen. Walter F. Mondale.

Carter began the 1976 campaign with a large lead in the public-opinion polls. His pledge of a more open government gained him the support of many people who were looking for a change in leadership after the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the resignation of a vice president (Spiro Agnew) and a president (Richard Nixon). Incumbent President Gerald R. Ford, although popular with the voters, was hampered by the worst economic slump since the 1930s and by his pardon of former President Nixon.

By election day, most of Carter's early lead in the polls had evaporated as Carter was accused of temporizing on major issues and as the Ford campaign gained increasing impetus. Carter was never able to make an impact on the Western states, and he lost much of the traditional support of Catholics, as well as of others who were fearful of electing a Southerner, a born-again Christian, and a nonestablishment outsider. His eventual victory may have hinged on his performance in the three presidential debates with President Ford, which appeared to convince many voters that he was of presidential stature. His narrow margin of victory was carved out in the South and the East, while he did poorly in the West and the Midwest. He won the popular vote by 40,827,394 (50.1%) to 39,145,977 (48.0%) for Ford, and the electoral vote by 297 to 240, with one vote going to Ronald Reagan.

Jimmy Carter was inaugurated on Jan. 20, 1977, and immediately began to take symbolic actions to demonstrate his disdain for what he considered to be "the imperial presidency." After taking the oath of office, he and members of his family walked to the White House.

In foreign affairs, Carter undertook to establish human rights as a tenet of American policy. His frequent criticism of nations that violated basic human rights and his pleas in behalf of Soviet dissidents angered the Soviet

government, which viewed the statements as intervention in its internal affairs. Despite these differences, Carter and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev signed the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II) in Vienna in June 1979, setting limits on the numbers of Soviet and U. S. nuclear-weapons systems. In spite of his vigorous campaign, however, the treaty was not ratified by the Senate and eventually was placed in limbo by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. That invasion also resulted in Carter's insistence on an American boycott of the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow.

Carter brought to fruition the long negotiations over the Panama Canal treaties by persuading the Senate to ratify them.

The highlight of the Carter foreign policy came on March 26, 1979, with the signing of a peace treaty by Israeli Premier Menahem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat. The so-called Camp David accord represented a high point in the Carter presidency, although later negotiations to implement it foundered.

Questions of national defense were a continuing concern during the Carter term. He decided not to support the development of the B-1 bomber or the enhanced radiation "neutron bomb." He did, however, approve the development of the cruise missile as a part of the nation's nuclear deterrent force. He also agreed to begin full-scale development of the Mobile Missile (MX) to counter the threat of Soviet military capability to knock out the U. S. land-based intercontinental missiles on a surprise first strike.

Probably the most perplexing problem facing President Carter was the seizure in November 1979, by radical Iranian students, of American diplomats and embassy employees in Teheran. More than a year of inconclusive negotiations with the Iranian government, plus an unsuccessful airborne attempt to rescue the hostages, proved to be difficult political and policy problems. Although many people were dissatisfied with Carter's handling of the hostage seizure and many blamed his administration for not having protected embassy personnel in the first place, the delicate problem was muted somewhat as an issue owing to the paucity of reasonable alternative plans, the erratic nature of a succession of Iranian governments, and fears generated by Iranian threats to punish or kill the hostages.

Much of the 1980 presidential campaign was played out under the cloud of the hostage problem. Ironically the hostages were finally released on Jan. 20, 1981, the day of the inauguration of Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan. Their freedom was obtained in exchange for concessions that included the unfreezing of Iranian assets in the United States.

On assuming office in 1977, President Carter inherited an economy that was slowly emerging from a recession. He had severely criticized former President Ford for his failures to control inflation and relieve unemployment, but after four years of the Carter presidency, both inflation and unemployment were considerably worse than at the time of his inauguration. The annual inflation rate rose from 4.8% in 1976 to 6.8% in 1977, 9% in 1978, 11% in 1979, and hovered around 12% at the time of the 1980 election campaign. Although Carter had pledged to eliminate federal deficits, the deficit for the fiscal year 1979 totaled \$27.7 billion, and that for 1980 was nearly \$59 billion.

Carter also faced a drastic erosion of the value of the U.S. dollar in the international money markets, and many analysts blamed the decline on a large and persistent trade deficit, much of it a result of U.S. dependence on foreign oil. The president warned that Americans were wasting too much energy, that domestic supplies of oil and natural gas were running out, and that foreign supplies of petroleum were subject to embargoes by the producing nations, principally by members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). In mid-1979, in the wake of widespread shortages of gasoline, Carter

advanced a long-term program designed to solve the energy problem. He proposed a limit on imported oil, gradual price decontrol on domestically produced oil, a stringent program of conservation, and development of alternative sources of energy such as solar, nuclear, and geothermal power, oil and gas from shale and coal, and synthetic fuels. In what was probably his most noted domestic legislative accomplishment, he pushed a significant portion of his energy program through Congress.

Other domestic accomplishments included approval of the Carter plan to overhaul the civil-service system, making it easier to fire incompetents; creation of new departments of education and energy; deregulation of the airlines to stimulate competition and lower fares; and environmental efforts that included passage of a law preserving vast wilderness areas of Alaska.

Rosalynn Smith Carter

As the 1980 election approached, Carter found himself under increasing attack by Republicans and important elements within the Democratic party. The critics argued that his performance suggested an ineptitude and lack of leadership that had permitted the nation to drift under his presidency. In July 1980, Carter received a favorable rating of only 21% in the Gallup Poll. That was the lowest rating any president, including Richard Nixon at the time of his resignation, had received since polling began in 1936.

It was partially due to the president's low level of public esteem that Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts entered the 1980 campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. It seemed at the time to be a reasonable political move. Jimmy Carter was widely perceived by the public to be ineffectual in the office. Nevertheless, at the Democratic National Convention in New York in August, Carter received the nomination on the first ballot, with 2,129 votes to Kennedy's 1,146. Carter had fashioned his winning margin out of victories in 24 state primaries while Kennedy was winning 10. He received 51.2% of the primary votes, compared with 37.6% for Kennedy and 2.9% for Gov. Edmund G. Brown, Jr., of California.

The ensuing presidential campaign was one of the most lackluster in modern history. Public disenchantment with both major candidates caused former Republican congressman John Anderson (Ill.) to file as an independent. He engaged in one televised debate with Reagan (President Carter refused to participate) but was not invited to take part in the subsequent debate between Carter and Reagan.

During the campaign most polls showed the two major candidates locked in an even contest. The election produced a different picture. The Republican team of Ronald Reagan and George Bush was swept into office in a landslide victory with about 51% of the popular vote (and 489 electoral votes) to Carter's 42% (49 electoral votes) and Anderson's 7%.

Carter returned to Plains, Georgia in 1981, the same year that the Carter Presidential Library opened in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1986 Carter dedicated the Carter Center in Atlanta, an institution devoted to promoting peace and democracy abroad through the use of mediation measures, election monitoring, and the advocacy of basic human rights. Both the former president and Rosalynn Carter received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1999 for their work in fostering peace, and in 2002 Jimmy Carter was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his "untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development."

Carter has written two volumes of memoirs—*Keeping Faith* (1982) and *An Hour before Daylight* (2001)—along with *The Blood of Abraham* (1985; rev. ed., 1993), about the Middle East, *Turning Point* (1992), about the 1976 election campaign, and several other books.



President Carter's birthplace

