

Jimmy Carter's Legacy. Human Rights in the Abstract versus "Shameful and Indefensible Foreign Policy Positions"

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"Carter was the least violent of American presidents but he did things which I think would certainly fall under Nuremberg provisions," said Noam Chomsky. Much like Nobel Peace-prize winner Barack Obama 30 years later, Carter was an advocate of human rights in the abstract, but of repression and imposition of power through violence in practice.

Like the current occupant of the White House, Jimmy Carter entered office with a promise to respect human rights, but failed miserably when given the opportunity to do so.

Carter just last month published a memoir about his "[Full Life](#)." Others have begun to look back at his four years as President. David Macaray, writing in [CounterPunch](#) on 8/14/15, noted that despite his reputation as a President so hapless his fellow Democrats tried to knock him off in a primary, "a closer look shows that Carter accomplished some fairly important things during his single term in office - things that, given the near-paralytic gridlock that defines today's politics, seem all the more impressive in hindsight."

Macaray lists 10 accomplishments which were, indeed, impressive. Among them were supporting SALT II (Strategic Arms Limitations Talks); brokering the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty through diplomacy at the Camp David Accords; granting amnesty to Vietnam draft-dodgers, and presenting a plan for universal health care.

However, the self-professed advocate for human rights demonstrated quite the penchant for bloodshed. While he didn't initiate any aggressive invasions of foreign nations the way his predecessors and successors did in Vietnam, Grenada, Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan and many other countries, Carter proved remarkably generous at providing financial, military, diplomatic and ideological support for fascist dictatorships that tortured and killed millions of members of their domestic populations in an effort to crush popular movements for social justice. Some of the regimes he backed carried out mass slaughter that amounted to genocide.

Below are some of Carter's most shameful and indefensible foreign policy positions that caused monumental levels of death, destruction and suffering for poor, socially disenfranchised people from Asia to Latin America to Africa.

1. Zaire, 1977

After the CIA-sponsored assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961, Mobutu Sese Seko ruled as dictator for 16 years – changing the name of the Congo in 1971 to Zaire. In early 1977, rebels fighting with the revolutionary MPLA popular movement in Angola re-entered Zaire to resume their civil war and oust the military strongman. Mobutu sought help from his American and European allies to crush the movement.

William Blum writes in *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and CIA Interventions Since World War II* that Carter, who had been in office for only two months, was reluctant to involve his administration in a far-reaching intervention whose scope and length could not be easily anticipated.

However, Carter did provide “non-lethal” aid, while he did not protest as European countries offered military aid, and Morocco sent several thousand of its US-trained military forces to aid Mobutu.

“President Carter asserted on more than one occasion that the Zaire crisis was an African problem, best solved by Africans, yet he apparently saw no contradiction to this thesis in his own policy, nor did he offer any criticism of France or Belgium, or of China, which sent Mobutu a substantial amount of military equipment,” writes Blum. [1]

2. Guatemala, 1977

The Carter administration issued a report critical of the human rights records of the military government and officially [cut off aid](#). However, Blum argues that this was little more than a public relations stunt while tangible support continued: “the embargoes were never meant to be more than partial, and Guatemala also received weapons and military equipment from Israel, at least part of which was covertly underwritten by Washington. As further camouflage, some of the training of Guatemala’s security forces was reportedly maintained by transferring it to clandestine sites in Chile and Argentina.” [2]

Meanwhile, the horrors of a genocidal campaign against the indigenous population continued unabated on Carter’s watch. Death squads were eliminating peasants, labor leaders, human rights activists and clergy. In the countryside, the military would torture and burn alive “subversives,” such as Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú’s own brother.

3. East Timor, 1977

After the democratically-elected President Sukarno of Indonesia was overthrown with the assistance of the CIA in 1967, mass-murderer Suharto assumed power as military dictator and a strong ally of the US government.

In late 1975, Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford gave the green light to Suharto to invade neighboring East Timor. After occupying the capital city Dili, Indonesian troops systematically rooted out resistance by the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) and the civilian population across the island. Residents of occupied areas were subjected to massive re-education brainwashing campaigns. The death toll from violence by Indonesian forces, malnutrition and disease quickly climbed into the tens of thousands.

The genocidal slaughter reached its peak in 1977, On March 1, 95 members of the Australian Parliament sent a letter to Carter claiming the Indonesian troops were carrying out “atrocities” and asking the American President “to comment publicly on the situation in

East Timor.” [3]

The response was crickets. Carter ramped up aid with funding and weapons to the murderous Indonesian regime, brazenly flaunting the human rights requirements imposed on American aid.

As journalist Richard Dudman reported at the time: “amid all the talks about human rights, the country with perhaps the worst record has been getting increased amounts of economic and military aid from the Carter administration,” which is attributed to the “bonanza enjoyed by American oil companies and multi-national corporations since the present military regime came to power.” [4]

Precise statistics on the death toll of East Timorese at the hands of the Indonesian forces – who enjoyed the unconditional support of the US government – are hard to come by, but [FAIR](#) noted in a 1994 article that “by the time Carter left office, about 200,000 people had been slaughtered.”

4. Angola, 1978

In 1978, the South African Defence Forces (SADF) carried out a massacre against a refugee camp in Cassinga, Angola. SADF bombers dropped bombs over sovereign Angolan territory that killed more than 600 Namibians.

When details of the attack came to light, the U.S. made sure that the racist regime would not face sanctions in the UN Security Council.

[Carter](#) took the excuses of the apartheid government at face value: “They’ve claimed to have withdrawn and have not left any South African troops in Angola. So we hope it’s just a transient strike in retaliation, and we hope it’s all over.”

Granting the racist South Africans a blanket diplomatic shield at the UN and allowing them free reign to terrorize their neighboring Southwest African countries at will, while subjecting their own domestic population to the crime against humanity of apartheid, would prolong the suffering of millions of Africans for another 15 years.

Meanwhile, Carter and his administration would continue demanding the immediate exit of the Cuban military from Angola. As many as 30,000 Cuban troops had been stationed in Angola since 1975 to prevent South Africa from toppling the nascent revolutionary MPLA government and installing a puppet regime that, according to historian Piero Gleijeses, “would be the centerpiece of the Constellation of Southern African States that [South Africa] sought to create.” The constellation would be “anticommunist, tolerant of apartheid, and eager to persecute [Nelson Mandela’s] ANC and [Namibian liberation movement] SWAPO.” [5]

5. Afghanistan, 1979

When the Communist government came to power in 1978, they brought health care and education to a wide segment of the Afghan population. In cities such as Kabul, women enjoyed significant freedom. But this state of affairs was impermissible to the U.S. government, who sought to empower a local opposition and recruit foreign fundamentalist jihadists to join the struggle to topple the Communist regime.

“US foreign service officers had been meeting with Moujahedeen leaders to determine their needs at least as early as April 1979,” writes Blum. “And in July, President Carter had signed a ‘finding’ to aid the rebels covertly, which led to the United States providing them with cash, weapons, equipment and supplies, and engaging in propaganda and other psychological operations in Afghanistan on their behalf.” [6]

Blum says that intervention by the US and other countries worried Russia about what kind of government would end up on their borders. The Russians, Blum writes, “consistently cited these ‘aggressive imperialist forces’ to rationalize their own intervention in Afghanistan, which was the first time Soviet ground troops had engaged in military action anywhere in the world outside its post-World War II Eastern European borders.” [7]

Soviet troops would enter Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, 1979. By the time they left in disgrace ten years later, the country was largely reduced to rubble. The devastation was so severe that the Taliban, who managed to displace the barbaric Moujahedeen, were seen by many as liberators.

It would be another 22 years before the U.S. experienced blowback on its home soil, when one of the “[Anti-Soviet warriors](#)” they had courted and helped train from Saudi Arabia would mastermind a plot to turn civilian airliners into missiles that were flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

6. El Salvador, 1980

On February 19, 1980, Archbishop Oscar Romero, hugely popular among Salvadorans for his embrace of liberation theology, which sought to improve the socioeconomic conditions of oppressed people, sent a [letter](#) to Jimmy Carter that is worth quoting at length:

In the last few days news has appeared in the national press that worries me greatly: according to the reports your government is studying the possibility of economic and military support and assistance to the present junta government.

Because you are a Christian and because you have shown that you want to defend human rights I venture to set forth for you my pastoral point of view concerning this news and to make a request.

I am very worried by the news that the government of the United States is studying a form of abetting the arming of El Salvador by sending military teams and advisors to ‘train three Salvadoran batallions in logistics, communications, and intelligence.’ If this information is correct, the contribution of your government instead of promoting greater justice and peace in El Salvador will without doubt sharpen the injustice and repression against the organizations of the people which repeatedly have been struggling to gain respect for their most fundamental human rights.

Romero went on to say that the junta had “reverted to repressive violence producing a total of deaths and injuries much greater than in the recent military regimes whose systematic violation of human rights was denounced by the International Committee on Human Rights.”

“I hope that your religious sentiments and your feelings for the defense of human rights will move you to accept my petition, avoiding by this action worse bloodshed in this suffering country,” Romero pleaded.

Romero's letter to the President went unanswered. Nine days later, the Archbishop was [gunned down at the altar](#) by a death squad assassin while holding the Eucharist above his head. At his funeral, snipers opened fire on defenseless mourners, killing at least 30 people.

Carter responded by sending [\\$5 million in aid](#) to the junta. They would use it to escalate their bloody counterinsurgency campaign. Fueled by American money and arms, the Civil War in El Salvador would rage on for another 12 years. It would reach its horrific culmination with [massacre of six Jesuit scholars](#), their housekeeper, and her teenage daughter in 1989.

Post-Presidency and Legacy

It should be noted that Carter's actions after leaving the White House have been, by far, the most impressive of any ex-President. Most importantly, he was the first mainstream political figure to call Israel's policies in the occupied territories [Apartheid](#). This major paradigm shift has paved the way for the mainstream legitimacy of international Palestinian solidarity movements such as BDS to challenge the state of Israel's crimes.

His [Carter Center](#) also has done extensive work studying voting systems and certifying the validity of electoral processes. In 2013, Carter debunked Secretary of State John Kerry's description of the Venezuelan election of Nicolas Maduro as questionable by stating that that the voting was "[free and fair](#)." This was a strong counterweight to American state propaganda, which sought to empower the losing Venezuelan opposition by refusing to grant legitimacy to the socialist, democratically-elected government.

But Carter's post-Presidency activism cannot bring back to life the millions of people whose lives he was complicit in extinguishing. Carter leaves behind a blood-soaked legacy strongly at odds with the view he evidently held of himself as a human rights champion. The fact that he is probably the least violent of American Presidents is as much an indictment of the American public – among whom he is still perceived as a pacifist – as it is on his murderous presidential peers.

Matt Peppe writes about politics, U.S. foreign policy and Latin America on his [blog](#). You can follow him on [twitter](#).

Notes

[1] Blum, William. *Killing Hope: U.S. Military and C.I.A. Interventions Since World War II – Updated Through 2003*. Common Courage Press, 2008. Kindle edition.

[2] Ibid.

[3] as quoted in Chomsky, Noam and Edward S. Herman. *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume 1*. Boston: South End Press, 1979, pg. 171

[4] Ibid, pg. 173

[5] Gleijeses, Piero. *Visions of Freedom: Havana, Washington, Pretoria, and the Struggle for Southern Africa, 1976-1991*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2013. Kindle edition.

[6] Blum, op. cit.

[7] Blum, op. cit.

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