Jimmy Carter
Keeping the faith

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT
Listen to Presidential at http://wapo.st/presidential

This transcript was run through an automated transcription service and then lightly edited for clarity. There may be typos or small discrepancies from the podcast audio.

JIMMY CARTER: Morning, everybody. I see you're awake. Is there anybody here who feels uninstructed?

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: This is the voice of Jimmy Carter starting his Sunday school lesson at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia, just last week.

JIMMY CARTER: Well, I wanna know: Who am I teaching? So, if you don't mind, let's start on this side and just tell me what state you're from or country.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Georgia.

JIMMY CARTER: Georgia, very good.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Florida.

JIMMY CARTER: And Florida.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Kentucky.

JIMMY CARTER: Kentucky.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Alabama.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Indiana.

JIMMY CARTER: Indiana. OK.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Texas.

JIMMY CARTER: Massachusetts?
AUDIENCE MEMBER: Texas.

JIMMY CARTER: Texas. OK.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: California.

JIMMY CARTER: Texans speak out a lot louder than that. And California. OK.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: These days, people come from all over the country to hear him talk about his faith.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Tennessee.

JIMMY CARTER: Tennessee, OK.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: New Jersey.

JIMMY CARTER: New Jersey.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Germany.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Actually. All over the world.

JIMMY CARTER: Chile. Welcome. And China.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: This is Jimmy Carter's hometown. It's a tiny town in southwest Georgia where he was born. It's where he returned after years in the Navy to help run the family farm when his father died. And it's where he lives now at 91 years old with his wife, Rosalynn.

JIMMY CARTER: Lived in New York state once, and it's connected in New York. Began my married life in Norfolk, Virginia and went to school in Maryland and lived in San Diego. Lived in Hawaii. We built our present house in 1961. And when we moved in, that was the 16th house in which Rosalynn and I had lived after we got married, so we've lived in a lot of different places. I didn't ask this side over here -- different ones?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Missouri.

JIMMY CARTER: Missouri.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: D.C.

JIMMY CARTER: I lived in D.C. too. I forgot about that.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: This episode is about Jimmy Carter's path to D.C. and his time in the White House. But it's also about faith -- how faith has shaped Carter's life and his leadership in and out of the presidency. I'm Lillian Cunningham with The Washington Post, and this is the 38th episode of “Presidential.”

PRESIDENTIAL THEME MUSIC
LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Ok, this week I have fellow Washington -- sorry.

ROBERT COSTA: Chill out. This is all going to be good. Relax. Swallow. Take a breath. Breathe. Alright, wait, let's pause. And then, you're going to tear into it.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: This week, I have a fellow Washington Post co-host. It's Robert Costa. He's one of our star political reporters here. And Bob, you usually cover Republican politics, but you've had a longtime fascination with Democrat Jimmy Carter. Why is that? What do you find so interesting about his campaign, his presidency?

ROBERT COSTA: Jimmy Carter. You've got this character who comes out of nowhere to win the presidency, and he's known as this liberal president. But when you look at his backstory, it's complicated. And we get into this in our reporting this week in our conversations. He's someone who comes out of the Deep South in a time of racial unrest. He goes to the Naval Academy. He's pro-business, but he's liberal. He runs a peanut farm. He takes chances. He's smart. He's tough. But he's also passionate. He's a complicated political figure and a great one for our discussion.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Great. Well, thanks for doing this with me. And we have a couple of really great guests on this episode. One person we'll be talking to later is Pat Caddell.

ROBERT COSTA: He's a character who comes out of the Carter campaign. In his early 20s, he joins up with Carter and has this vision that this peanut farmer -- this one-term governor -- can actually win the White House running as an outsider -- someone who could bring trust back to Washington.

And before polling became a big thing in American politics, he was someone who was kind of a guru, providing Carter with data and memos and strategy. And he was with them at the beginning.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, we're going to speak with him for this episode a little later. And first, we have on Randall Balmer. He's a theology professor at Dartmouth, and he's also the author of a recent -- pretty recent -- biography of Jimmy Carter that focuses on his faith, and it's called 'Redeemer.'

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, let's just get going.

ROBERT COSTA: Let's start. Let's dive in.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Great. Thank you so much, Randall. We deeply appreciate your time and insights.

ROBERT COSTA: Thanks so much.

RANDALL BALMER: Oh, you're welcome.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, I'll just tee it off. And so, Randall: Carter is born in Plains, Georgia in 1924 -- you know, a Southern Baptist in a small town in the segregated South. Tell us what that was like.
RANDALL BALMER: I think to really understand Jimmy Carter, you have to go to Plains, Georgia. Jimmy Carter himself was born in Plains. Actually, he was the first U.S. president to be born in a hospital, because his mother Lillian was a kind of itinerant nurse and she had access to those sorts of facilities that many other women in the community did not have at that time.

And Jimmy Carter spent his first three years in Plains, and then the family moved about three miles down the road to Archery, Georgia, in a little farm there they all worked on.

And it’s impossible to visit that place and not be impressed with the humble origins of Jimmy Carter. And Carter himself has never complained about that. In fact, he’s often made the case that his family was more prosperous than many of their neighbors. But it’s really kind of a stark contrast to, well, let’s say, some of our more recent presidents who have been born into much more affluence.

Plains, Georgia, of course, was part of the segregated South. Particularly back in 1924 that really didn’t begin to change until, at the earliest, the 1950s and then into the 1960s.

But Jimmy Carter had several black playmates and they apparently treated one another as equals. And he’s spoken many times of the day when the three of them were entering their teenage years, and, all of a sudden, they were out playing in the farmstead.

And one of the playmates opened the gate for Jimmy to pass through in front of the others. And at first he thought it was some kind of trick. They were going to trip him up or something like that. But he realized that it was an important transitional moment because it marked the time when they all became racially aware. And Carter has spoken about that quite poignantly and with great regret.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Well, and he was quite rare in that respect. I mean, he and his family stood out in Plains for being progressive on racial equality. Even years later, he’d end up being the only white man in the town who refused to join the White Citizens Council.

ROBERT COSTA: Yes. When you think about Carter's childhood, I always think of two women: Miss Julia, as she was always called -- Julia Coleman, his teacher. And of course, his mother Lillian. It seemed like, not only did they tell him to recite Bible passages and to go to Sunday school and to be faithful, but his mother, in terms of her views on race, his teacher -- her views on education and the way they infuse faith in those discussions with the young Jimmy Carter -- seemed to be so important.

RANDALL BALMER: Absolutely. I think that’s true. Lillian Carter was something of a rebel almost all her life in the Plains community. In 1964, for example, she was head of the local committee in favor of Lyndon Johnson. And Jimmy Carter has talked about how many times during that campaign, Lillian Carter would come back to her automobile and found it had been defaced in some way protesting her rather advanced views on politics but also on race.

One of the things she did as a nurse was to go into African-American homes and help provide health care and that I think did make a profound impression on young Jimmy Carter.

Julia Coleman -- he's talked about many times and even mentioned her in his inaugural address as president -- was a formative influence as well, not only for reinforcing the kind of faith and piety
but also in introducing him I think to the life of the mind.

She persuaded young Jimmy Carter to read ‘War and Peace.’ And in his dogged way, he finished that book. She also said in the classroom many times, ‘Who knows? Maybe somebody here in our school can someday be president of the United States.’ And, of course, young Jimmy Carter was listening.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: If I were to walk into a room and meet him even, you know, as he’s in high school or at the Naval Academy, who’s the man I would meet?

RANDALL BALMER: I think you would find a very earnest man. And Jimmy Carter is still earnest to this day. Jimmy Carter is something of an introvert. Actually, I've come to believe that there are two kinds of political personalities -- two poles on a huge spectrum. At one end of the pole is Jimmy Carter.

The other end of the poll is Bill Clinton. And even though their politics are not all that different, in terms of personality, they couldn't be more different. In many ways, I think Jimmy Carter is somebody who is difficult to know in many ways. I came away from my conversations with him persuaded that the only person he fully trusts is Rosalynn.

That may be a bit of an exaggeration, but he's not somebody who has many close friends. He tends to be quite, quite private. And I think if you'd looked in on him when he was at the Naval Academy, you would've sense that. He was somebody who was eager to please -- very ambitious in a quiet way that probably would would escape your notice initially. But a man, nevertheless, burning with ambition -- somebody also who was not above -- and I think that's probably, still true -- holding grudges.

For example, coming out of the Naval Academy, he applied to be a Rhodes scholar, but he was not chosen. And I think that's stuck with him for a long time, and, in some ways, he had a chip on his shoulder about that and other perceived slights.

The other thing that surprised me in doing the research for the biography is that I think many Americans who lived through the Carter years and the Carter presidency assume that his mother was the real formative influence on the family and on Jimmy Carter himself. And I don't think that's the case. I think his father was the real formative force in that family. His father led the youth group in the Plains Baptist Church. He also taught Sunday school in Plains Baptist Church. And Jimmy Carter I think really was formed much more by his father than by his mother.

ROBERT COSTA: Randall, tell us about Earl Carter. What kind of man was he? We see even now in his late age, President Carter is teaching Sunday school. And what was it about Earl Carter that shaped Carter at that young age?

RANDALL BALMER: I think it was the example of his father. And, in particular, in 1953, Jimmy Carter at that time was stationed up in Schenectady, New York and as an officer in the Navy. And, rather suddenly, he is summoned back to Plains to stand at the bedside of his father who was dying and what happened then was I think really quite remarkable and formative for Jimmy Carter because he witnessed individuals from the community coming into the hospital to pay their respects.
And people would come in and talk about how Mr. Earl helped them carry their mortgage at a time when they faced foreclosure or granted them credit from the Carter store at a time when they couldn't pay their bills.

And that had a profound effect on Jimmy Carter -- so much so that, after his father died tragically at the age of 53, Jimmy Carter went back to Schenectady and promptly informed Rosalynn that he was resigning his commission in the Navy, and he planned to go back to Plains and have the same sort of influence in the community that his father had had.

The political dimension of that relationship is that Earl Carter, shortly before his death, had been elected to the Georgia legislature, and, of course, was unable to fulfill his term. And that I think is what got Jimmy Carter thinking about politics even though he didn't consult with Rosalynn about it until he announced his candidacy for the Georgia State Senate.

ROBERT COSTA: When you think about Rosalynn Carter, she's been at his side for so many decades -- a tough woman, a smart woman. She's someone who's had a relationship with Carter that goes back to their youth. She also grew up in Plains, but she started dating Jimmy Carter when he was studying at the Naval Academy. So they married by the time his father dies.

Tell us about the tension in their marriage when he decides to move back to Georgia. He's this rising star in the Navy. He's on the submarines. She's looking forward to an international life at the sea as the wife of someone who's an officer in the Navy. And then they come back to Plains because the father's death.

RANDALL BALMER: Very difficult for her Rosalynn at that point. The idea of going back into this very small town -- and Plains is a small town, there's no question about that -- did not appeal to her. And according to several accounts, their car trip from Schenectady, New York down to southwestern Georgia transpired in almost total silence between these two very, very strong-willed individuals.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, maybe you can talk a little bit more about that strong will and what ultimately becomes his political ambitions. He starts serving as a state senator in 1963, runs for governor of Georgia in 1966 but loses the primary then. And then he runs again in 1970, and he wins.

RANDALL BALMER: Yes.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, you talked about holding grudges and this ambition that he has. But what did he learn from that loss in '66 and what do we start to see of the political shrewdness that's developing in Carter?

RANDALL BALMER: Yes. The 1966 campaign for governor was quite bitter for Jimmy Carter. He threw himself into it heart and soul. He lost 22 pounds during the course of the campaign. The Carter family put their own resources into the campaign. He traveled all over the state.

And to lose that election to, of all people, Lester G. Maddox, one of the most notorious segregationists in the American South during the 1960s, was for Jimmy Carter a bitter pill. And he went back to Plains, and he has a spiritual renewal -- if not a conversion, a spiritual renewal -- in part, at the behest of his sister Ruth Carter Stapleton, who was a Pentecostal minister. And Carter
gets rights with Jesus and almost immediately begins campaigning once again for governor, running in 1970 -- four years later. This is a tawdry campaign. This is a campaign in which Carter engages in behavior that I think he's quite ashamed of.

He engaged in some race baiting. He curried the favor and won the endorsement of several segregationists in Georgia at the time, but he was so eager and so determined to win, he really discarded the better part of himself in many ways.

This is a campaign that Carter and the Carter presidential Library doesn't talk much about. And I think that the simple reason is that he's ashamed about it, and he doesn't like to revisit that moment. You know, we could have a long discussion, I think, about ethics and about ends and means and so forth. But what becomes clear after he wins that campaign in 1970 is that he turns, almost immediately, and tries to atone, in many ways, for that campaign.

In his inaugural address as governor of Georgia on January 12, 1971, he memorably states that, in Georgia, the time for racial segregation is over. And this is, of course, picked up by the New York Times and other news outlets the following day.

And Jimmy Carter very quickly morphs into a so-called 'New South Governor,' that is a post-segregationist governor. Now, I don't think for Carter the transformation is instantaneous like that. I think that his life and his career up to that point suggests that he was, in fact, sensitive to racial matters. He did want to end segregation and so forth. But the campaign in 1970 is a tough one, and it's tough to reconcile that campaign with the Jimmy Carter who later became president and then, of course, quite a distinguished former president.

ROBERT COSTA: What's the conclusion most people have about Carter as governor -- his record?

RANDALL BALMER: I think Jimmy Carter as governor was seen as, certainly for his time and place, a progressive governor. He made several important changes in prison policy there in Georgia. Also put portraits in the state capitol of some important African-Americans in Georgia, including Martin Luther King Jr. He was known as somebody who was quite eager to support women's rights and women's equality -- someone who already was taking an interest in environmental matters and environmental concerns and someone, who, overall, was concerned about issues of justice.

ROBERT COSTA: Randall, when you look at 1971 and 1972, as you said, Carter's on the front page of The New York Times. He's on the cover of magazines. He starts to surround himself with this tight-knit group of aides, and they go to the 1972 Democratic National Convention and they see all these different players. And Carter and his confidants -- they say to each other, 'If these guys can do it, if they can be here on this stage, why not us?'

How crucial was that period -- '71, '72, '73 -- to convince Carter, even if it was very privately, that he could be a player in presidential politics?

RANDALL BALMER: Utterly crucial for understanding that. As the various Democratic aspirants for the presidency began to visit him in Georgia, many of them staying overnight in the governor's mansion, he began at that point to say to himself, 'Listen, if these guys can be president, why can't I? I'm at least as good as they are.'

Jimmy Carter rarely lacked in self-confidence about himself and his abilities. So, it's at that point...
that he begins to think, 'Yeah, maybe I can do this.'

At about the same time, especially right after the 1972 Democratic National Convention, as you say, he begins to gather around him several aides -- notably, Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan -- and they begin to encourage him to think about running for the White House.

ROBERT COSTA: So, talk to me about this Georgia Mafia -- I love that phrase -- that starts to surround Carter, and they meant it in a good-natured way. But Hamilton Jordan, Jody Powell...in the run-up to the 1976 campaign, Carter has this group of young men around him who are convinced he's the horse to ride. And what happens in that period before '76, where they start to think it through?

RANDALL BALMER: Well, they work very hard, and nobody works harder than Jimmy Carter himself. But yes, you're quite right. Jody Powell and Hamilton Jordan, Gerald Rafshoon and others surround Carter, and they really stick with him throughout both the campaign and into the presidency.

And this, of course, becomes a matter of contention once Carter does go into the White House. I said earlier that I think that there are very few people that Jimmy Carter totally trusts, and they were among those people. And he really didn't widen his circle of advisers very much beyond -- that's, in many ways, one of the things that crippled his presidency -- but that coterie of young, ambitious, energetic young men really does provide the springboard for Carter's run for the Democratic nomination in 1976.

ROBERT COSTA: So, one of those young advisers in Carter's close inner circle -- in fact, the only one who wasn't from Georgia -- ends up being Pat Caddell, who's joining us now by phone.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: And Pat was originally the pollster for George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign. He was 21-years old at the time and he meets Jimmy Carter while he's on the campaign trail for McGovern and they're passing through Georgia.

ROBERT COSTA: -- During that rocket '72 race. Alright, we'll dive in. Pat, it's great to have you with us. Tell us about how you first came to know Jimmy Carter.

PAT CADDELL: Well, I first met Jimmy Carter in 1972. Jimmy Carter had asked McGovern to stay at the governor's mansion and asked him to specifically bring me along on the trip, and I met him that night.

Senator McGovern had gone to bed, and I sat up in the kitchen -- God, I don't know how late in the morning with Jody Powell and one of his sons -- and talked politics with the then-governor. And I had -- he had -- it'd been a subject of great interest to me.

I'd done my thesis work on the changing South -- the rise of sort of the new moderates. We had a long talk about politics. That's the first time I met him.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: What was your first impression of him?

PAT CADDELL: I liked him. He was very, you know, very friendly. But, I mean, he was an intensely intelligent man. And, you have to understand, southern Democrats, at this point in time were --
still 100 years after the Civil War -- really not a central part of the national party, and that was particularly true in the early late '60s, early '70s.

And Jimmy Carter was trying to break through that. And I had always been interested in a Southerner being president because I thought, particularly after Watergate and Vietnam, that the South was the only part of our country that had ever known defeat. And America would need someone who instinctively came from that kind of background to help heal it. I believed that this was going to require something from the outside -- something new.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, in May of 1974, while Carter's near the end of his time as governor, he gives a speech to the University of Georgia Law School that gets him a ton of attention as the sort of moral politician with a conscience. And it essentially propels him into the '76 presidential campaign.

ROBERT COSTA: Unfortunately, there's not a great recording of the speech. But if you read the transcript of it and talk to people who were there, you realize it was incredibly powerful, and it just shot off these waves of attention for Carter.

RANDALL BALMER: He talks about his understanding of justice and where it came from. He cited two major sources: First was Reinhold Niebuhr, the famous Protestant theologian who said that the sad duty of politics was to establish justice in a sinful world. And Carter has quoted that many, many times throughout his life and throughout his career. But the other source he quoted was Bob Dylan -- and particularly Bob Dylan's song, 'Ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more' -- as introducing him to the plight of tenant farmers. And this is the speech that was so impressive for Hunter S. Thompson of Rolling Stone magazine, who it's fair to say, I think got on the Carter bandwagon after that law day address.

PAT CADDELL: Just blew everyone away who heard it, and I was blown away by it. It was not the sort of subtlety and thought and emotion that you expected from someone who came from a Southern state or even a politician. It was much more a mixture of both a sense of the country -- about morality, religion and a passion for justice.

The theme at that speech was: 'We have two kinds of justice in America, and it's wrong,' you know? And so, that theme, by the way, resonates even today in our justice system. It was very, very powerful. His instincts were so well-honed politically beyond anything. And people forget that.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, skipping ahead then to 1976 and his presidential campaign. What does his faith look like on the campaign trail and the idea of having a candidate run who's a born-again Christian -- how is that initially received by the American public?

RANDALL BALMER: I think it's first of all important to remember where we were as a nation at that time.

We had, really, two presidents in succession who had lied to the American people. Lyndon Johnson had lied to us about Vietnam. Richard Nixon had lied to us about pretty much everything.

And Jimmy Carter comes onto the scene as somebody who: A) is not part of Washington. And B) someone who openly declares that he is a born-again evangelical Christian, thereby sending every
journalist in New York and Washington trying to figure out what in the world that meant. So, in that campaign he talks about the importance of goodness and honor and honesty.

He repeatedly says, 'I will never knowingly lie to the American people.' I try to tell undergraduates these days what a remarkable statement that was in the mid 1970s. We had just become so accustomed to politicians lying to us. Carter comes along and says, 'I’m not going to lie to you.’ And Americans took notice.

Many Americans -- it’s fair to say -- are a little suspicious of some of his religious statements and declarations. But Carter refused to back away from them, and he really used that in many ways as a signature for his campaign in 1976. And again, coming on the heels of the Nixon administration scandals, Americans were ready for somebody who was evidently a moral person who had so-called family values even though that term really hadn’t entered into the political lexicon quite yet in American politics.

ROBERT COSTA: But was America changing at that time in terms of the evangelical voting block? Was it becoming a significant group and Carter also saw an opportunity there to underscore his own values?

RANDALL BALMER: To understand evangelicalism, you have to go back really I think 50 years before the campaign to the Scopes trial that took place in Dayton, Tennessee in July of 1925.

What comes out of that trial is that many evangelicals begin to feel that the larger culture is effectively laughing at them. That is, the larger culture has turned against them and their values.

And so, they begin to retreat into their own world -- their own network of educational institutions, Bible camps, seminaries, churches. And then you have the 1970s. In November 1973, there’s a remarkable gathering of progressive evangelicals in Chicago, and they produce something called the Chicago declaration of evangelical social concern, which is really a remarkable statement of evangelical concern for those on the margins, just as evangelicals in the 19th century had been concerned about slavery, for example -- about the rights of women and so forth. So, what’s happening among evangelicals is that they’re beginning to feel politically less wary.

And then Jimmy Carter comes along as a presidential candidate sounding many of those same themes and this Southern Baptist Sunday school teacher who speaks unabashedly about being a born-again Christian captures their imagination.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Would you mind talking about how his faith in particular factored into this '76 campaign? I would love to hear what kind of discussions there were among those working with him about how much he should discuss it -- whether there was some hesitance.

PAT CADDELL: Well, it wasn't something we played up. It was something he had felt deeply. It was part of his make-up. But he understood that, not his particular religion, but that faith mattered to people, and it would have an enormous impact on the election, both for him and against him.

Being a born-again Christian was not something people really, in the rest of the country, were that familiar with. And if they were, it was more of a caricature in many cases, particularly inside the Democratic Party. And then it would become a real problem during the famous Playboy interview that he did.
And we are, all of us who are around him, were responsible. We thought this was a great way to
deal with his religion because it was a real problem in places like California, liberal communities,
and it was a way for him to -- in a long form -- try to explain himself. And that's when he used the
term about lust in his heart, which became a huge story in September and put us into a kind of a
tailspin and, of course, upset a lot of our Southern base and our Baptist base around the country,
our Protestant base. Why would he go to Playboy?

I remember one of the editorial cartoons from that era showed Jimmy Carter looking at the Statue
of Liberty in the 'State of Undress' and so forth. The media had a field day with it. And Carter’s
ranking in the polls dropped 15 percent.

The reason he gave the Playboy interview in the first place is that he wanted to dispel the notion
that he was holier than thou -- a little 'Goody Two Shoes.' He was trying to navigate between
being a credible candidate for president and being a person of faith. And that was a kind of a
tough line to walk, in many ways.

And I think the Playboy interview indicates that he didn't pull it off quite as successfully as he
might have. Had it not been for the Playboy interview, every indication from polling suggests that
he was headed for a landslide victory in 1976 rather than the squeaker it turned out to be.

ROBERT COSTA: Lily, Carter enters the White House in January 1977 with so many challenges in
front of him. He's got the country at his back -- he famously walks down Pennsylvania Avenue on
his first day in office to be a man of the people -- but he's immediately confronted by an energy
crisis, by inflation, by us a sense of national unrest that the country is slipping away from its grand
past.

The U.S. had just been through the Vietnam War. It had been through Watergate, but Carter starts
to think, 'Maybe I can engage with different parts of the world. Maybe I can be a man of the
world.' And he looks especially to the Middle East, shaped in part by his faith.

Randall, one of the signature moments of the Carter presidency was so full and driven, in part, by
Carter's own faith and that was in September of 1978 at Camp David -- the Israeli-Egyptian peace
talks. Anwar El-Sadat and Menachem Begin come together with Carter. How did his faith influence
those moments as they talk through things intensely over 13 days?

RANDALL BALMER: I think his faith was utterly crucial for that. On his first day in office, Jimmy
Carter met with Walter Mondale, his vice president. And to Mondale's astonishment, Carter said
that one of his priorities as president would be to try to bring peace to the Middle East.

Now, I think that agenda in itself was informed at least, if not dictated, by his religious convictions.
Jimmy Carter believed that the so-called Holy Land -- and it's a term he used and still uses to refer
to the Middle East -- was a place that badly needed diplomacy.

And so, as you point out, he goes to Camp David with Anwar El-Sadat from Egypt and Menachem
Begin of Israel, two old enemies, and he tries to negotiate a peace deal between these two very,
very suspicious world leaders.

And at crucial moments, Carter does indeed appeal both to Begin and to Sedat on religious terms
and, in particular, at a moment at the end of the negotiations, Carter appeals to Begin and talking about Begin's grandchildren and the kind of world they will inherit if there is not some sort of breakthrough there at the Camp David talks. And that proves to be the critical moment that turns the tide -- arguably, it turns the tide of history. I think in foreign policy, he understands very quickly the importance of moving away from the dualistic Cold War paradigm into a new phase of foreign policy -- one that emphasizes the importance or even the centrality of human rights.

So, this is important to him, and he still sees this to this day as being a major shift, a major contribution that he has made to American foreign policy. He also understands that if the United States is to have any meaningful relationship with third world nations, generally, but particularly with Latin American countries, the U.S. needed to renegotiate the Panama Canal treaties, which were a relic of America's colonialist past.

And he decides to do that early in his presidency. Many of his advisers, including Rosalynn, said, 'No, wait till later. Wait till the second term because it's going to stir up a lot of opposition.' But Carter, being the kind of bullish person that he is, decided that he wanted to get it done sooner rather than later. And I think that probably hurt him and his presidency because he expended a great deal of political capital in order to get those treaties renegotiated and especially to get them ratified by the U.S. Senate.

He also understands the importance of presidential appointments. He appoints more women and more people of color to executive offices -- administration offices -- than any other person in American history.

ROBERT COSTA: Tell us about some of the challenges that plague Carter's presidency. There was the energy crisis, of course, there was the tough time with the economy. What was it like in those years -- '78, '79, especially -- after he'd had his first year and dealing with Congress and all of that?

PAT CADDELL: Well, it was very -- it was very hard. He was under a lot of criticism. You had a huge agenda, and that was my argument -- that we were trying to take on too much, too soon and we should have really kicked some things and stayed with him. But Carter was very ambitious and wanted to do everything at once. And he had a lot of problems with Congress, taking on the water projects -- that really ticked off a lot of Democrats on the Hill and they had the same problems solved and it is a very difficult period.

I started feeling very strongly, toward the end of '77 and '78, that part of our problem was we also had a government of people who were very activist, who never quite understood why Jimmy Carter was there and thought he was an ideological oddity. He was a moderate Democrat. Carter's efforts at trying to cut the government, get the government confident and whatever -- ran into a lot of opposition.

I thought the White House -- and it seemed to me that this is true of all White Houses -- it's so insular. There is a certain loss of perspective. That certainly was haunting us. We had a lot of real crises and a lot of real problems, particularly with energy and other things. Most administrations don't have that many that quickly.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: Pat, would you mind describing his management style? I've seen him described as, at times, a micromanager. But what was your observation of the way that he went about trying to get people behind his vision, even those who were on his staff?
PAT CADDELL: The problem was, as we would later figure out, we were stretched very thin of people that were close to him. He was a hands-on manager, very deep in the details. But he delegated -- one of the great mistakes we had made was to allow the cabinet officials to pick all of their own subordinates. This was a real mistake. He gave people he managed a lot of running room, but he was also very, very involved.

The problem was we had no central governing vision other than doing the right thing, and Carter would not entertain politics, for the most part, in those decisions. And we did not have an overarching governing vision, as we had had in the campaign, or one that we had conveyed to the people in his administration. So, there were so many things in so many different directions.

And he was deep into the substance, and I felt that that this was partly because he was so much less ideological than presidents often are. And he had outstanding Cabinet members -- and some were not. Some were basically running their own shows without regard to the president, which led to a part of that crisis.

ROBERT COSTA: Well, Pat. Let's talk about that for a second. It's the summer of 1979. He has an energy crisis on his hands. People are lining up and frustrated at gas stations. There's violence and war flaring up around the world, and people are starting to see Carter maybe as not as competent as they would have hoped.

And so, he's getting all of this information. He's watching the newspapers and the networks. And he's getting some memos from Pat saying: Something has to change. You've gotta change this presidency before it gets away from you. And so, they decide to have a speech -- a crisis in confidence speech that goes to the soul of the country, rather than just having a policy prescription. And it's really about American values more than American politics.

PAT CADDELL: He initially was supposed to be giving an energy speech, and he was unhappy with the draft that his speechwriters had prepared for him. So, he summons these various leaders -- including sociologist Robert Bellah as well as a number of faith leaders -- and he asked them, 'Are we in a crisis? Are we in a moral crisis in America at this time?'

And so, the speech that arises out of that is really two speeches, if you look at it carefully. One is the opening part, which is kind of a clarion call to morality and telling Americans that we need to rise to our better selves.

The second part of that speech is the energy speech, and the initial response to the speech was positive. It wasn't until the pundits began to pile on that a lot of people thought that Carter was a doom-and-gloom president.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: So, we're going to play a short clip from the speech. Here it is:

JIMMY CARTER CLIP: It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national world. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America. The confidence that we have always had as a people is not simply some romantic dream or a proverb in a dusty book that we read just on the Fourth of July. It is the idea which founded our nation and has
guided our development as a people. Confidence in the future has supported everything else -- public institutions and private enterprise, our own families and the very constitution of the United States. Confidence has defined our course and has served as a link between generations. We've always believed in something called progress. We've always had a faith that the days of our children would be better than our own. Our people are losing that faith.

ROBERT COSTA: What leads Carter to have this crisis of confidence speech and to then get rid of many of his cabinet members?

PAT CADDELL: Well, that was a problem. Those two were not supposed to be related. For some time, I had been harping on what our problems were. Our numbers were terrible. He was losing the confidence of the American people, and the American people were losing confidence in him and the country. He gives a speech that is mainly the crisis of confidence and what we must do and what he has learned. Just overnight, he gains 15-16 points in the Gallup poll -- the biggest increase for a president, ever, when it was in a non-war situation. All of this is forgotten.

The cover of Newsweek had him on there with, like, a halo. All of that lasted about three days until we fired the cabinet. It was a terrible mistake. We should have waited and done it one by one. It distracted from that. That was a problem of, again, coordinating agendas. You have no idea how much internal fighting there was. People threatened to resign over it or whatever, but it had been a huge plus for him at the beginning.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: His challenges in the White House really hit their peak when, in November of 1979, 52 Americans are taken hostage in Iran.

ROBERT COSTA: Randall, in Carter's memoir, which is titled 'Keeping Faith,' he writes about the 1979 to 1980 period with the Iranian hostage crisis as 'the most difficult period of my life.' How did he handle that period?

RANDALL BALMER: I've often described Carter's year in 1979 as '1979: The no good, horrible, terrible, very bad year.' It was just a disaster for him in many ways.

In November, the taking of the American hostages in Iran was arguably the fatal blow to the Carter presidency and his prospects for re-election. It is during that time that Carter, nevertheless, sticks to his principles. A lot of people are saying, 'Just go in and bomb Tehran and take 'em out.'

And Carter refuses to do that -- not only for the hostages, but also for the collateral damage that any such strike would inflict. And so, I think, even in moments of crisis -- perhaps, especially in moments of crisis -- he sticks with his religious principles. I think it's fair to say, with Carter, his faith is always present for him.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: He does, of course, lose his bid for re-election in 1980. Having the evangelical vote would not have been enough to help him win, but what has changed by 1980 in terms of religion and politics?

RANDALL BALMER: The changes were profound. This is where a lot of people, I think, misunderstand the historical record. I mentioned earlier that evangelicals after the Scopes trial really had retreated from the larger society. They were not organized politically, and it's really during Carter's presidency that you see the congealing of this political movement that we know
today as the religious right.

The reason for that -- it's often ascribed to the Roe v. Wade decision on abortion in 1973. But abortion had nothing to do with the rise of the religious right. What got the religious right going was that the internal revenue service, with the backing of the federal courts and the Nixon administration, actually, began to deny tax exempt status to so-called segregation academies -- that is, educational institutions that were racially segregated.

One of the places the IRS targeted in the mid 1970s was a fundamentalist school in Greenville, South Carolina called Bob Jones University. That is what got evangelical leaders mobilized politically. There's this huge backlash among people like Jerry Falwell and others. And Jerry Falwell, who had his own segregation academy in Lynchburg, Virginia, and Paul Weyrich, the conservative political activist, is savvy enough to recognize that he can harvest this discontent into a political movement. And, thus, you have the origins of the religious right in the late 1970s.

The great irony surrounding the religious right, of course, is that politically conservative evangelicals, at the behest of Paul Weyrich and other leaders of the so-called New Right, mobilize to deny reelection to a fellow evangelical.

That is, they mobilize behind Ronald Reagan in the election of 1980, and in so doing, turn their back on a man who was demonstrably an evangelical. And so, this is one of the great paradoxes that, I think, surrounds Jimmy Carter's political career. It was during his administration that the religious right congeals into a political movement that denies him a second term in the White House.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: If you look around today at the ways that religion and politics intersect, do we still see the legacy of that period?

RANDALL BALMER: We do see the legacy of that period. The religious right certainly helped to reshape the American political landscape, beginning in 1980 and well into the 21st century, in affiliating themselves with the far right fringes of the Republican Party in the late 1970s.

They so identified themselves as Republicans, that, in 2016, it's impossible for them to back away from that and to have second thoughts about endorsing the Republican nominee this year, even though he's hardly a paragon of family values.

ROBERT COSTA: When you think about Carter in 1953 returning to Plains, in 1981 returning to Plains -- this is a president with a sense of place. How do we understand this town and this commitment to the town when we understand Jimmy Carter?

RANDALL BALMER: I think coming back to Plains the second time was very difficult for him and even more difficult for Rosalynn. In fact, I asked him about this and pressed him a little bit on this. He said that, after losing the bid for reelection in 1980 and coming back to Plains in 1981, Rosalynn was quite depressed and quite angry -- angry at the press, angry at Ted Kennedy, who had challenged Carter for the nomination, angry at Ronald Reagan -- angry at everybody.

And Carter spent a good bit of time trying to assure Rosalynn that they still had a life together. They still had a life ahead of them. They could still do good things in the world. And I asked him about that. I said, 'How did you bounce back so quickly from what was an utterly devastating
political loss?'

And he said, 'Well, I had to keep telling Rosalynn that things were not as bad as she thought they were. And finally, I began to believe it myself.'

And that’s what put him on the road toward the establishment of the Carter Center and his remarkable ex-presidency.

ROBERT COSTA: In his post-presidency, Carter becomes an international figure -- somewhat controversial at times for his position in Israel but also revered for his commitment to service, winning the Nobel Peace Prize and so many other awards. How has his religion played a part in his post-presidency in shaping that path?

RANDALL BALMER: I think, in many ways, once freed from the burdens of political office and particularly the presidency, Jimmy Carter, since leaving the White House, has been free to act more fully on his religious impulses. He has been active in pushing human rights around the world. The Carter Center has done remarkable, remarkable work in alleviating disease and illness, sickness, poverty throughout the world. And this is very, very clearly an outgrowth of Jimmy Carter's religious convictions and his sensibilities.

He has advocated for equal rights for women. Rosalynn Carter has said that her biggest disappointment about her husband's presidency was their failure to secure ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution, which would have encoded into law the notion of sexual equality.

So, Carter throughout his post-presidency, I think, has acted much more fully than he could have as president.

LILLIAN CUNNINGHAM: It sort of makes me wonder why, to begin with, he went into politics.; why he wanted to be president; why he wasn't always just pulled toward the charity, non-profit, humanitarian space. What was it that he saw about being president that he thought that was the right platform to do the work he wanted to do in the world?

RANDALL BALMER: When Carter was running for the seat in the Georgia State Senate, the Carter family hosted a traveling evangelist who was preaching at Plains Baptist Church and having dinner at the Carter home. In the course of the dinner conversation, the preacher really tried to chastise Carter for running for political office, telling Carter that his time would be better spent out there preaching or doing good works.

And Carter got his back up, apparently, and he said, 'Well, how would you like to have a church with 22,000 parishioners?' -- referring to the number of constituents that he would have as Georgia state senator.

So, he pushed back against that because he thought politics was a vehicle for doing good in the world. And I think Jimmy Carter still believes that. Politics, in its noblest form, does provide the platform and the tools for making the world a better place.

JIMMY CARTER CLIP: Just think a minute about what one or two or three people in your life has set an example for you -- maybe your mother or father or maybe your grandfather or maybe a
schoolteacher or maybe just some famous person that you know, like Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela or our forefathers George Washington or Thomas Jefferson. But try to get it more personal than that if you possibly can in your mind for a moment -- to find an example of someone.

If you wanted to do a great thing with your life, an extraordinary thing with your life, a very wonderful thing with your life and not just the average -- whom would you look to be an example?

That’s up to you. You might have to go back to the forefathers or something like that. But anyway, remember that we are also setting examples for other people. And that’s another motivation, not just to correct the problems that we have in our country today or in our own lives. But we have an obligation to set an example for those who look upon us as a guide to form their own lives.

One thing we have to do is to decide for ourselves -- and this is not easy -- what kind of person do I want to be? We talked about that a lot last month. Not what do I want to be, like a doctor or a lawyer or rich or I want to live in a beautiful neighborhood or I want to be famous or things like that. But: What kind of person do I want to be? Let's start with that. What kind of person do I want to be? And you -- what kind of person do you want to be? And if you say, 'I'm an American citizen, and I want to be the kind of person who sets forth my goal in life to be superb or ordinary or remarkable or admirable,' then how do you do it?