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PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER AND THE MIDDLE EAST: REEXAMINING HIS LEGACY FORTY YEARS
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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. RIEDEL: Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Welcoming to the Brookings Institution. My name is Bruce Riedel. I'm a senior fellow from the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings and director of the Brookings' Intelligence Project.

And my guest today is my friend and colleague, executive director and distinguished lecturer, Kai Bird. Kai is an author of many books. His specialty is in biography. He has written for example the award-winning book, "The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames," a legendary CIA operative who brokered the first connection between the United States and the Palestine Liberation organization back in the 1970s.

He is most recently the author of the "The Outlier." A biography of the 39th American president, James Earl Carter better known, of course, as Jimmy Carter. This is, in fact, only the second full length treatment of his life from birth from Bill today. Remarkable given most presidents have biographies galore about them. Certainly, Barak Obama already has a bookshelf worth of biographies about him.

Jimmy Carter is a little bit different. He came into office with a great deal of promise after the end of the Watergate Scandal, but he left four years later under of something of a dark cloud. And he's been something of an outlier, hence the title, with his own political party.

No Democratic president visited Jimmy Carter in his home in Plains, Georgia until Joe Biden just a couple of months ago. Joe Biden was the first American president to come and visit him in Plains, Georgia. Joe Biden was also the first Senator to endorse him for president back in the 1970s. So there's something of a link there.

Jimmy Carter deserves much more credit for his presidency than he has been given and particularly his role in the Middle East. In many ways, you could say the modern Middle East was shaped by Jimmy Carter. And we're going to focus on that over the next hour particularly looking at his success in brokering the Egyptian/Israeli peace treaty and his dealings with garrote including the fall of the shah and the 444 days of the hostage crisis.

Before that I would like to introduce Kai to say a few words, but I would particularly like

him to talk about something that has nothing to do whatsoever with the Middle East, a lady named Mary Fitzpatrick who played an extraordinary role in the Carter White House for its four years. Kai?

MR. BIRD: Well, thank you, Bruce, for that introduction. It's good to be with you and the Brookings to talk about Jimmy Carter and "The Outlier."

And yes, Mary Prince Fitzpatrick is a fascinating figure in the Carter world. She as a young woman in her 20s, this African American woman was involved in a bar fight and someone pulled a gun and she tried to apparently wrestle the gun to the floor and it went off and killed a young man.

She was then the victim of Southern justice and was given a public defender who promptly persuaded her to plead guilty and she was sent to life in prison. And she then in prison met Rosalynn Carter then the wife of the governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter. And at the time the practice in the Georgia governorship, like many southern states, was to have what they call trustees sort of seconded from prison to work as chefs or gardeners or nannies in the governor's mansion.

I sort of regard it as a vestige of slavery and serfdom. It's a very weird institution, but that's what it was in the '60s and '70s. So Rosalynn Carter persuaded Mary Prince Fitzpatrick to come work in the governor's mansion and work as a nanny to their young daughter, Amy. And then she would go home every night to prison.

Well, Amy adored Mary and the Carters came to believe that Mary was entirely innocent of this murder conviction and she became a part of their family. And then when they moved into the White House, people forget, but Mary Prince Fitzpatrick move to the third floor and lived in the White House for the entire four years.

And she was still then a convicted murderess not on parole even. She was, you know, just seconded from the Georgia prison at the orders of the President of the United States. And eventually, she was given a pardon and when Carter left the White House, Mary joined them back in Plains, Georgia and to this day, she works as their housekeeper. She's a part of the family.

The Carters bought her a house and, you know, she's -- unfortunately, I was never able to talk to her because she is so discrete and loyal to the Carters. But I start the book out by telling this incredible story of sort of redemption and because I think it sheds a light on who the Carters are and their decency and how they practice their religious beliefs.

MR. RIEDEL: It does indeed. I mean is a brilliant insight the nature of Jimmy Carter. It is also remarkable that it isn't widely known. This is a huge story and I don't ever remember reading about it before this point. Congratulations on bringing that story out.

Let's turn to the Middle East. I think I want to start with Camp David and the pursuit of the Arab states. Jimmy Carter came into office in early 1977. His predecessor, Richard Nixon and Ford, had reluctantly engaged in the peace process after the shattering moment of 1974.

Henry Kissinger then achieved his worldwide fame of disengagement agreements, but the central issue in the crisis future of the Palestinians was never addressed by Kissinger. And by 1977, his disengagement agreements had run their course and the United States was basically trying desperately to hold an international conference to get something going forward.

And then in May of 1977, much to the shock of the Central Intelligence Agency and many others, Menachem Begin, leader of the hardline right wing Likud party was elected Prime Minister of Israel. And for those who thought there was already a slim chance of peace, it looked even slimer. But Carter decided to pursue it despite everything.

And can you give us some insights into why Carter found this issue so compelling that he would spend the next four years of his presidency according a peace treaty?

MR. BIRD: Right. No, it's very curious. I mean he had no real experience in the Middle East aside from a week-long trip where he tooled around Israel in 1974, maybe '73 in a station wagon along with Jody Powell and Rosalynn.

But, you know, he came from the very first day in the White House, he announced to Brzezinski and his other foreign policy aides that he wanted to make peace in the Middle East a priority. And I think, you know, it's a simple explanation. He, again, comes back to his religion. He thought of it as being peace to the Holy Land. And he had studied the issue a little bit during his sojourn at the Trilateral Commission where he first met Brzezinski. And he thought there was, you know, a path forward to settling this long conflict.

And you're right. His first big stumbling block was the election of Menachem Begin to the prime ministership. This obviously is going to make it more difficult. But he was determined and he engaged in a long series of correspondence with Anwar Sadat, met Sadat, met Begin. He actually

formed a real bond with Sadat. Their correspondence, handwritten correspondence is the archives and open and it's very touching.

And Sadat comes across, you know, surprisingly to me as a really eloquent writer in English and they connected. And Carter made it his mission to try to help Sadat. Anyway, I don't know. Do you want to jump ahead to Camp David, the 13 days?

MR. RIEDEL: Yeah, go on. I mean I had been at one Camp David summit. It was a complete failure. I have to say Carter is master of issue and his ability to work with two very, very different men, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin (inaudible). You, I think rightly in the book say about Jimmy Carter that there would have been no agreement. Can you say a few words about Jimmy Carter and Camp David and how he pulled it off?

MR. BIRD: Well, he's a relentless personality. Just determined and, you know, he's famously an engineer and he brings to any task an engineer's attention to detail. And he, you're right, he prepared very well for looking for these negotiations. He realized that it was going to be tough. He realized from the very beginning that you couldn't just throw these two guys into a room together and expect to come out with an agreement. So he kept them separate and then he went back and forth between cabins negotiating language. Just very meticulous.

But here's the really interesting thing that I bring to the history of Camp David and those most dramatic 13 days. You know, it's regarded by most historians these days as, you know, a brilliant piece of personal diplomacy by Carter, but that it was limited. That the Camp David accords really only gave Israel sort of a separate peace with Egypt.

And Sadat, you know, was given back the Sinai and the Israelis moved out of their settlements in the Sinai and there was a real peace, albeit cold peace, between Israel and Egypt. But that Camp David and the accords left out the Palestinian part of the equation.

Actually, I argue that that's not true. And argue that from Jimmy Carter's perspective, he thought that he had included in the accords a path forward for solving the larger Palestinian/Israeli conflict. Something that would, in according to his diary, lead eventually to some kind of self-rule for the Palestinians essentially a two-state solution.

And he had thought specifically that he had gotten, Menachem Begin's agreement to

have a five-year freeze on any settlement activity in the West Bank. And this was agreed to in a separate letter that Begin was supposed to sign late that Sunday morning it was agreed to and Begin never actually signed that language. He substituted another letter and by that time they were literally scheduled to announce the accords on the White House lawn within hours.

And Carter left Camp David thinking that Begin would, you know, agree and sign the letter and it never happened. So from Carter's perspective, Begin lied to him. He reneged and walked back from what he had agreed to and within days. And this is the source of all the tension and the criticism that Carter, you know, laid on the Israelis. He kept pushing them to try to, you know, stop building settlements.

And this is the source of all of the controversy surrounding Carter's view of the Palestinian problem. And it all goes back to Camp David. And I argue that, you know, if you look at the diaries and the memos that went back and forth and the letter that Begin had agreed to, it was all there. And would have provided a rationale path forward to Palestinian autonomy and eventually a two-state solution.

MR. RIEDEL: Now, as you point out in the book, the day after Camp David or maybe a day later, he calls (inaudible) I have a commitment to a settlement of peace and, of course, it didn't really happen. Aside with (inaudible) Israeli/Egypt peace. It was a breakthrough of (inaudible) more like 1967 or 1973 (inaudible). Egypt no longer (inaudible) of Israel. Israel really for the first time actually had a sense of safety and security. That has continued despite the fascination of Anwar Sadat, the overthrow of (inaudible). The replacement of Muslim Brotherhood government and a new Egypt dictator.

So as a contribution the stability in the region and for American foreign policy leaving aside Russia (inaudible). This was a really notable accomplishment by Jimmy Carter. And one that very much is and his alone. He made it happen.

It is often forgotten that after Camp David essentially the whole thing fell apart and he had to fly back to the Middle East and shuttle between Jerusalem and Cairo to get a deal. But it's a testament to say his perseverance that he went on.

Now, since leaving the White House, Carter has written, I don't know. You know, how many books.

MR. BIRD: Thirty-three.

MR. RIEDEL: How many?

MR. BIRD: Thirty-three.

MR. RIEDEL: Thirty-three, thirty-three books. And several of them are about the Middle East. And he's used explosive terms like the apartheid state. How is he viewed now in Israel and by the borders of Israel and the United States? This man who basically ensured the survival of the state of Israel has now become targeted for a great deal of criticism?

MR. BIRD: Yeah, and he's virtually a pariah in Israel, I would argue. And, you know, even in the Jewish American community here in this country people sort of scratch their heads and say, well, you know, I guess he's sort of a decent guy, but isn't he anti-Israeli?

And, you know, this comes back to the pressure that he tried to exert on Begin for reneging on the freezing of the settlements. You know, within weeks they were building big new settlements in the West Bank in the wake of Camp David. And Carter just regarded this as a betrayal.

And, you know, he thought that Begin had deceived him so he believed it was not in the interest of Israel to see these settlements built in the West Bank he was going to change the equation, change the demographics of the Israeli state and danger eventually the Jewish majority. And endanger the whole notion of a possibility of a two-state solution, question the very, you know, legitimacy of the state.

So he thought this was crazy and not in the self-interest of the Israelis to go down this path. And he, you know, over the decades, he, you know, pushed and pushed. And at the Carter Center he met with Yasser Arafat and attempted to, you know, push again. He had, you know, a role, I think, in persuading Arafat to think about a political settlement of a two-state solution and all this that led to the Oslo agreements.

And then when all that began to fall apart, he wrote another book about the whole conflict. And you're right in the title of the book, he used the word apartheid. It was Palestinian peace, not an apartheid. But, you know, he was severely attacked.

I mean I think a half dozen trustees from the Carter Center resigned in protest. His chief Middle East advisor resigned in protest. His long-time aide who was his domestic policy advisor during

the White House years too. Eisenstat tried to persuade Carter to change the title of the book before it came out. But he insisted that this was necessary. He wanted to be provocative because he knew the danger of the path that Israel was going down under the Likud government.

So he to this day is a highly controversial figure in Israel and in the Jewish American community here in this country.

MR. RIEDEL: I think it is safe to say that the views about settlements, about the need to create a Palestine is far more mainstream in the United States. We've just been through the -- I don't know -- 1,001 (inaudible) in our life. And polling shows that pro-Palestinian thinking in America are much more evident now than it ever was back in the 1970s.

MR. BIRD: Right. Carter has really been proven to be impressive. We now have something called J Street, the liberal sort of Jewish lobby group that claims that it is pro-Israel and pro-peace, but they are trying to desperately say to the option of a two-state solution and they're against settlements. And, you know, essentially Carter was a prophet on this issue and he's been proven to be right, I think.

But, you know, at the time it was really difficult. He took on this issue and this is a hallmark of his presidency. He was willing to take on high risk political issues regardless of the cost.

Well, he, you know, not only took Egypt off the battlefield for Israel, but he got no political capital out of this. You know, he won 72 percent of the Jewish vote in 1976 and he only won 45 percent of it in 1980. He lost the Jewish vote.

And Jewish American leaders like Rabbi Alexander Schindler and others just, you know. Even after Camp David, which they gave him credit for. They criticized Carter as being anti-Israel or at least not empathetic enough of Israel's special relationship with the United States. And he had real troubles with Major Edward Koch of New York who criticized him for his Middle East policies.

And, you know, at the extreme he was accused of anti-Semitism. Just a grossly unfair charge.

MR. BIRD: Before we leave Camp David and the Israel/Egyptian issue, I can't help but note that when he came into office in 1970, he had a blueprint of how to deal with the Middle East. That was a paper produced by the Brookings Institute. This paper probably will go down in Brookings' history

as the single most important paper ever produced by anybody in the Brookings Institution.

But you note in the book that his National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, had played a big part in producing the Brookings' report which is something I had not known before. Can you say a few words about Brzezinski's role in the administration both in the Egyptian context? But also, more broadly in the (inaudible). We forget that Jimmy Carter was a Cold War president.

MR. BIRD: That's right.

MR. RIEDEL: He went into office fighting with the Soviets was as ingrained into Americans as having cheeseburgers for lunch. What was Zbigniew's presence like and his role?

MR. BIRD: Well, you're right. Zbigniew Brzezinski played a key role in the Brookings Institution report on Israel/Palestine in the early '70s and that influenced Carter's thinking.

Carter met Zbigniew first through his work at the Trilateral Commission where Zbigniew was employed for a time. And he recruited him as his National Security Advisor. Interestingly enough really over the opposition of many of his key aides who told him, you know, Brzezinski is a smart guy, but his world view is totally opposite and clashes with the world view of Cy Vance, the man you want to make as secretary of state. And so, this is going to cause internal tensions within the administration.

And Carter's response was, well, I like differences of opinion. I want to hear from both and I'm capable of managing it. Well, Brzezinski was a very disruptive personality.

He was as relentless as Carter was but in advancing his own views. And he was sort of classic Cold War year in the mold of Henry Kissinger. And he was an aristocratic Polish American who just had a visceral hatred of the Russians and the Soviet Union. And he thought that we were in a multigenerational conflict with the Soviet evil empire. And he saw every foreign policy decision through this prism of how to lay it on the Russians.

So at one point, you know, you can see in the archives. It's just amazing. Brzezinski repeatedly writes memos to Carter urging him to be tough on the Russians. To find somewhat to provoke them. To do something militaristic to make America look like the tough guy.

And Carter often writes comments in the margins, disagreeing with Zbigniew. At one point on one of these memos, he says, oh, you want me to do something tough like Mayaguez? Like the disastrous rescue mission in the Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford launched off the coast of Cambodia

that was a complete disaster, a misuse of military force?

So Carter and Brzezinski battled all the time. And Carter routinely rejected his advice. In one of my interviews, I asked him about this and he says, oh, I tolerate Brzezinski because he was very entertaining and he had 100 ideas every day, and I'd have to dismiss 98 of them. But they had serious arguments.

And I tell the story of one day after a particularly vociferous argument, Brzezinski goes back to his office in the West Wing and a few minutes later Carter's secretary, Susan Clough comes in and ostentatiously hands Zbigniew a green envelope signifying that this is a handwritten message from the President of the United States on green stationery.

So as Zbigniew opens it up and there is a message from Jimmy saying, Zbigniew, don't you know ever when to stop? And Zbigniew himself told me this story in an interview. He was proud of the story because he thought it reflected on, you know, the good relationship, the access, the power that he had with the president.

But I argue in the book again against the conventional wisdom that Brzezinski was often wrong in his advice. And Carter was right to reject his advice. And yet sort of the last year of his administration, he kind of begins to concede to Brzezinski on many of these Cold War issues. And this came particularly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and with the frustration of the long, drawn-out hostage crisis.

And, you know, for instance it was Brzezinski who finally nagged Carter into launching the military helicopter rescue mission, which was, of course, a complete disaster. And probably was a hopeless, ludicrous military operation that had no realistic chance of freeing the hostages, but Brzezinski had persuaded a very frustrated Carter that some kind of military option to rescue the hostages was necessary.

And, you know, ironically it was not Brzezinski who resigned or was fired, but it was Cy Vance who quit in that last year in the wake of the rescue mission out of just deep frustration.

And at the end of the book, I quote Richard Holbrooke who in one of his diary items claims that in December of 1980 after Carter lost the November election, he and Holbrooke were commiserating and Cy Vance, a very soft-spoken, mild mannered man turned to Holbrooke and said, you

know, I just don't understand why Carter tolerated Zbigniew. That man is evil.

So this was I think, you know, Carter's first major mistake as president occurred during the transition when he appointed Zbigniew Brzezinski National Security Advisor in my opinion.

MR. RIEDEL: Yeah, that definitely comes through, but I want to go to Iran in just a minute. But I think this maybe an appropriate time to tell my one Jimmy Carter personal note.

About a decade ago, I began writing a book about the American war in Afghanistan. Secretly the CIA ran (inaudible). I decided I would give an interview of Jimmy Carter, and it was set up. Everybody told me in advance Jimmy Carter could be a difficult man to deal with. That he didn't like talking about himself. He had strong opinions and that I should approach this meeting as potentially confrontational.

MR. BIRD: Okay.

MR. RIEDEL: I fly down to Atlanta and by my appointment. I went into my appointment and said, you know, President Carter, you devised in less than two weeks a strategy that essentially defeated the Soviets in Afghanistan by a Saudi/ Pakistanian/American alliance to support (inaudible) that was the decisive battle of the Cold War.

But of course, it was covert war so you didn't write anything about it in your memoirs because it was classified. But in many ways, you are the hero of the Cold War not Ronald Reagan. You won the battle. You devised the strategy and put together the alliances. Next, our meeting was one of the friendliest meetings I've ever had. But finally, someone is giving me credit. But I do think he deserves credit for it.

It was a remarkable response. It turned out to be very effective and looking back on it not a single American died on the battlefield in Afghanistan. Not a single American ever went on the battlefield in Afghanistan. It was a remarkably success use of surrogates to accomplish the objective.

But let's turn to Iran for a minute. Primary inherence in American policy towards Iran, which is all built around one man, the shah, who was supposed to be this farseeing leader who was going to take Iran from being a medieval country and create this Sweden in the Middle East as people said at the time.

MR. BIRD: Right.

MR. RIEDEL: I always wondered how the Swedes felt about saying that. And the unfortunate comment of flying to Tehran, I think on New Year's Day or Christmas Day --

MR. BIRD: Right.

MR. RIEDEL: -- and saying Iran is an island of peace, stability or whatever in the Middle East. How much blame does Jimmy Carter receive for the fall of the shah? And in your opinion, how much blame does he deserve?

MR. BIRD: You know, I think the Iranian revolution was going to happen. And as it happened, it happened on Carter's watch. But he couldn't have stopped it. He couldn't have saved the Pahlavi regime. It was becoming more and more unpopular and he also, you know, had bad intelligence. And as you say, he inherited this problem.

But there was very little understanding in the CIA or in the National Security establishment here in Washington of the nature of the opposition. You know, there was an assumption that perhaps the opposition would if it did seize power, it would be a bunch of sort of moderate socialistic secular minded nationalist who would establish a semi-working democracy.

But in fact, it turned out that the real motivation for the revolution was being fueled by religious fundamentalism and Ayatollah Khomeini was circulating these sermons on cassette tapes for several years before the revolution that became wildly popular and it became a sort of Shai nationalism. And Khomeini had a sort of secret agenda to establish a theocratic republic.

Anyway, I don't think the revolution could have been stopped in its tracks. There were from the declassified documents, you can see vociferous debates taking place inside the State Department and the Pentagon and the National Security Council where they kept trying to figure out is there something that we could do to rescue the shah from this revolution in the making?

Brzezinski himself was constantly pushing Carter to give a green light to a coup. Even, you know, on the eve of Khomeini coming back after the shah had left, Brzezinski was phoning the Ambassador on the ground in Tehran, William Sullivan, and asking him, you know, what about the Option C, a coup?

And there's a story in the book where, I believe, under Secretary of State makes the call to Sullivan and conveys the message that Brzezinski wants to know if Option C is still viable, a coup. And

Ambassador Sullivan says, tell Zbigniew Brzezinski to fuck off. And the shock under Secretary of State says, excuse me? And Sullivan who's a very blunt speaking diplomat says, you want me to say it in Polish?

So, you know, Sullivan thought this was completely unrealistic, not viable. It wasn't going to happen. The army was falling apart by this time. But, you know, Carter was a victim of historical circumstances there. And of course, over the next few months, they tried to establish a working relationship with the new revolutionary government, which indeed have a few sort of old national front moderate, secular minded leaders, Mehdi Bazargan and Ebrahim Raisi and others.

But of course, the hostage crisis then happened. And we can talk a little bit about how Carter was maneuvered into letting the shah get political asylum in this country that precipitated the hostage crisis. But Khomeini then used the hostage crisis to cement his own political power and to purge the evolutionary government of any moderates at all. And that's, you know, it's a long sad story.

MR. RIEDEL: I want to go to that. So I want to encourage people in the audience to send questions in. We will be eager to take audience questions in the last 10 minutes of the show.

In many ways, we came to believe our own propaganda. If you go back and look at the Eisenhower administration, the Kennedy administration, they had serious doubt about whether the shah was up for the count. But by the next administration, we had convinced ourselves, it really was the next Swedish Prime Minister.

MR. BIRD: Right.

MR. RIEDEL: The smartest guy in the Middle East. When, in fact, he was more than anything else a ditherer. Someone who finds it hard to make hard decisions. Now, the same charge has been delivered against Carter that he couldn't make up his mind between Brzezinski and (inaudible).

And then the shah leaves and there's suddenly a campaign to bring the shah to the United States. That this great man should not be a wandering Dutchman.

MR. BIRD: Right.

MR. REEVES: As Henry Kissinger so notably put it. Can you speak a little bit about the so-called Operation Alpha and the political pressure when the shah came?

MR. BIRD: Yeah, this is a great story. It's very colorful and forgotten. But Henry

Kissinger, David Rockefeller and John J. McCullough put together a concerted lobbying operation. They dubbed it Operation Alpha.

David Rockefeller paid for it. A lawyer from Milbank, Tweed was seconded to work full time on it. They hired a full-time publicist and they mapped out a strategy whereby each of them, Kissinger, Rockefeller and McCullough, would systematically contact some high-level official in the Carter administration and nag them about getting the shah into the country making the argument that we were turning our back on an old ally and what kind of message does this send to other allies today?

We have to show our loyalty and steadfastness. And, you know, in fact it was very self-serving because Rockefeller at Chase Bank was exposed to hundreds of millions of dollars of loans to the old part of the regime. And he was worried about whether the revolutionary government was going to pay them back. So there was some self-interest involved, but this campaign lasted from, you know, the time the revolution happened until November of '79.

And Carter resisted it. He kept saying, no, I'm not going to give the shah asylum here. He can go play tennis in Barbados or the Bahamas. And he actually in his diary noted his worries that if he did give the shah asylum that this would be so provocative that it might instigate a takeover the embassy. And what would his advisors tell him to do then if American hostages were taken?

I mean he really, you know. He had thought it out. He was aware of the possibilities of what, in fact, did happen. Anyway, he resisted this advice. He was very annoyed with Henry Kissinger and Rockefeller. You can see this again in his diaries.

And yet, these three men were relentless. They systematically went around not only Carter but they nagged Brzezinski who also got into the act. They approached Don McHenry who was then the Ambassador to the U.N. They went down to lower-level State Department employees and desk officers and nagged them. It was just extraordinary.

And finally, they passed the information that turned out to be false, that the shah was very sick and that he could only get medical attention at Sloan Kettering in New York City for his lymphoma cancer. And this was not true. He was sick with cancer, but it was a very slow growing cancer and he could have been treated at any number of facilities outside the United States.

Anyway, Carter finally agreed on humanitarian grounds with the support of Cy Vance who

had finally changed his mind on this issue to give the Shah asylum. And that, of course, as we know precipitated within days the hostage taking. And that lasted 444 days. And it was really the poison pill for the administration. And it explains why Carter didn't get reelected.

MR. RIEDEL: And Carter was not alone in thinking that the Embassy would, in fact, the Central Intelligence Agency warned them of how it happened. And the mission in Afghanistan, the mission in Tehran there warned them.

MR. BIRD: Right.

MR. RIEDEL: Not only was it false that the only place he could get this coverage, medical attention, was in New York. But in the book, you lay out that they botched the job when they brought him there. He ended up in a worse condition.

MR. BIRD: Yeah, he ended up getting worse treatment than if he had gone elsewhere. And he actually didn't die of the cancer. He eventually died of a mistreatment for spleen. And it was a surgery that was unnecessary. It was an extraordinary botched job as you say.

MR. RIEDEL: But the hostages are taken. We do the usual isolation and sanctions, okay? It has no impact. You've already mentioned that the failed rescue mission. I've always felt that we were lucky that the mission failed Desert One because if it had gotten to Tehran, it would have been a bloodbath.

MR. BIRD: It would have been a bloodbath probably. I mean, you know, some of the hostages probably would have been killed and many Iranians civilians and some of the rescuers would have been shot. It was a very complicated operation where every little piece had to work if it was going to succeed and, you know, that never happens.

MR. RIEDEL: No. The book and a fascinating amount of time, talking about the escapades of Bill Casey then Reagan's Campaign Chief. Later to go on to be Director of CIA. A man I spent an inordinate amount of time with. And you can in favor have to say he was one of the great espionage artists of all time.

You believe that he did interfere to keep the hostages in Iran. Bill Carter was out of office. Can you speak about that a bit because it's really an extraordinary statement?

MR. BIRD: Yeah, yeah. It's, you know, historians are reluctant to buy into the notion of

conspiracy stories. But, you know, some conspiracies do happen. Abraham Lincoln's assassination was a conspiracy.

And, you know, I tell this story in a short chapter called the October Surprise. And it's a wonderful colorful story. You know, Bill Casey was the campaign manager for Ronald Reagan in the Summer of 1980.

Casey, as you say, he was destined to become CIA Director, but he had worked in OSS. He had loved his time in London where he had a lot of fun running covert operations into World War II Europe. And, you know, he loved skullduggery. He was perfectly capable of sort of without telling Ronald Reagan, his candidate, he was perfectly capable of running a sort of backdoor operation.

So the allegation is that sometime in late July, Bill Casey left America even though he was the campaign manager and flew to London. And we know this actually happened. He went to London to attend an academic conference on the history of the OSS where he presented an academic paper and other historians like Bob Dallek were there and saw him.

But he was there for a long weekend, which gave him essentially enough time perhaps to fly into Madrid, Spain. And the allegation is that he did so and met with a representative of the Ayatollah Khomeini in late July in a hotel and it's a complicated story. And there was a congressional investigation led by the very respected Congressman Lee Hamilton called the October Surprise House task force. And they produced a report but they came to no real conclusion. They couldn't pin down whether Casey was actually there.

Well, years later, Robert Perry, a well-known investigative journalist who has unfortunately passed, was able to dig out from the Bush archive, the Bush Presidential Library in Texas, a memo referring to a cable from our U.S. Embassy in Madrid reporting that Bill Casey is in town for purposes unknown.

And, you know, I think that's a smoking gun. It shows that Casey was in Madrid for some mysterious reason. The October supervised task force was not able to find his passport. His travel diary mysteriously is missing. The last pages from late July of 1980.

Anyway, I think this provides good evidence that Casey indeed went to Madrid. Took this meeting and, you know, he probably didn't think it was treasonous. He thought he was doing due

diligence for his candidate, Ronald Reagan. He feared an October Surprise, i.e., that Carter might succeed late in the campaign and getting the hostages released and then as a result win reelection.

And he took this meeting and probably assured the Iranian representative of Khomeini that Ronald Reagan was a decent man and they could be assured that they would have a working relationship with this republican candidate.

And this in effect sent a green light to the Iranians that, you know, there was no need to come to a settlement right away with Carter. Khomeini had a personal anonymous for Carter. He had it in his head that Carter was very pro-shah. Anyway, I think it happened and if it did, it contributed to the defeat of Carter in the November of 1980 election. And it's an outrageous example of, you know, independent diplomacy undermining U.S. foreign policy.

MR. RIEDEL: It was an Israeli angle too. The Reagan administration would essentially turn a blind eye to Israel's, you know, sale of equipment to the Iran military which was crucial for the Iranians especially once the Iran-Iraq war began because if they couldn't get spare parts for F4s and their other aircrafts from the United States, but Israel had an abundance.

MR. BIRD: Right. And indeed, some spare parts were sold after Reagan became president. So if this happened, it actually explains the origins of the whole Iran-Contra scandal that happened, you know, just before Casey suddenly dies of a brain tumor in 1987. It plants the seeds. You know, Casey had a relationship with the Iranians and the backdoor to them.

So it's an incredible story and it makes perfect sense and I think given that memo from the Bush Presidential Library, it probably happened.

MR. RIEDEL: We are reaching the witching hour. I'm going to ask you one last question. Looking back, how would you rank Jimmy Carter on merits. He has traditionally been ranked pretty low. Not at the bottom, but certainly in the bottom third. How do you think he should be ranked and you will now be appreciating the man who is now the oldest living president of the United States in the years hopefully we'll have to him around?

MR. RIEDEL: Right. Well, I think historians are reevaluating the Carter presidency in the same way that Harry Truman's presidency underwent a reevaluation.

And, you know, once the archives open up and particularly once you see Jimmy Carter's

White House diary, which is a fabulous resource for presidential historians. You know, it's something he dictated every day and it's 5,000 pages of transcript of which we've only actually seen about 20 percent so there's more to come.

But, you know, these sources help to give you an inside look into his presidency. And, you know, people like to say, oh, Jimmy Carter great ex-president, a failed president, but this is kind of superficial.

You know, I argue it's a seamless thing. He is the same man in the White House that he is as an ex-president. And the subtitle of my book is the unfinished presidency of Jimmy Carter. And, you know, all is good work as ex-president are simply a continuation of the things, the good works that he was attempting to achieve when he was in the oval office.

And if you look at what he actually did in those four years, he actually passed more pieces of legislation than the Obama presidency or even Bill Clinton. If you look at the domestic ledger, it's really quite astonishing. He deregulated the airline industry which allowed Americans to fly for the first time, middle class Americans.

He deregulated the alcohol industry which allowed us to drink boutique beers in every American city across the country instead of stale, boring Budweiser.

He, you know, deregulated natural gas which opened up our energy sector. He passed the Alaska Land Act which gave hundreds of millions of acres into the wilderness the Protected Wilderness Act.

You know, you appointed Paul Volcker to the Fed knowing that Volcker was going to jack up interest rates in an effort to kill inflation, which eventually is what happened.

And then on the foreign policy side, he, you know, passed the Panama Canal Treaty. He negotiated the Salt II Arms Control Treaty, although it was never ratified by the Senate.

He normalized relations with China. He passed an Immigration Reform Act which allowed for refugee asylum. He made human rights -- more importantly he made human rights a center piece of U.S. foreign policy. And, you know, none of this has been walked back by his successors.

So his presidency is actually looking pretty good. And finally, I would simply argue that if you look at the man himself particularly in relation to some more recent presidents, shall we say, he was

without a doubt the hardest working. He put in the longest hours. He read 200, 300 pages of memos every day in the White House.

He was certainly probably the most intelligent, well-read president in the 20th century. And of course, he was the most decent without a doubt. So I think he's going to be looking much better in the decades to come.

But, you know, all biography is subjective and this is my story and take on the Jimmy Carter life and presidency. And I found it very colorful and entertaining as well. And an eyeopener.

MR. RIEDEL: We are one minute past the witching hour. Thank you very much for doing this event with us today. I highly recommend the book. I found it to be a page turner. And I thought I knew a lot about Jimmy Carter. I learned a lot.

Thank you very much for being with us today. And I thank all of you for tuning in and listening.

MR. BIRD: Thank you, Bruce.

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