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THE CURRENT: How will we remember Jimmy Carter's presidential legacy?

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PITA: You're listening to The Current, part of the Brookings Podcast Network. I'm your host, Adrianna Pita.

At age 98. Jimmy Carter, the 39th president of the United States, has been the longest-lived American president. As he's entered hospice care at home in Georgia, we, like so many others, are taking a look back at his presidency and his legacy. With us today is Bill Galston, the Ezra K Zilkha chair and senior fellow in Governance Studies here at Brookings. Bill, thanks so much for talking to us.

GALSTON: My pleasure.

PITA: So I want to ask you a little bit about the impressions of Carter as president. My memories of my child in the eighties is that people thought of him as he had been a good man, but maybe not a very good president. And it seems like maybe that's shifted and changed over time. What can you talk to us about public opinion of Carter then versus now? Have things changed about the way we look back at him?

GALSTON: Public opinion's certainly changed. Whether that's because people are changing their assessment of him as president or rather are reflecting on his post-presidency, which is one of the very best ever, is a more difficult question to answer. In his private life since leaving the presidency in January of 1981, his commitment to good works has been exemplary and influential. The Carter Center, for example, has turned into a major source of supervision of elections around the world, and it is trusted as a kind of neutral intermediary. He also participated in a lot of ceasefire negotiations; I recently heard President Carter talking about that. His participation in Habitat for Humanity, his humility, teaching Sunday school at a local church, expecting to be treated just as a member of the community. He has tried to exemplify a Christian life over the past four decades and I think has done an admirable job of it.

It's a more difficult question whether that has translated into a reassessment of his presidency. He is remembered, I think, for two things overall. You know, first of all, the Iranian hostage crisis and his inability to resolve it through either diplomacy or military action. And second, by the loss of control over the economy. I re-checked just to make sure, and my memory had not deceived me. Inflation had surged to 14%. 14% in 1980. And inflation is not just an economic phenomenon. It is also an indicator in the minds of most people that things have somehow gotten out of control. And I think those two events put together cemented an impression of weakness in the Carter presidency, a sense that a good man had just been overwhelmed by forces that he was unable to control. I don't think that has changed.

PITA: A colleague of ours, Bruce Riedel, recently wrote about Carter's forgotten crisis, which was a foreign policy success in preventing a Soviet-backed coup in Yemen. You've talked about, of course, the economic crisis under Carter. There was the oil shock crisis and the Iranian hostage crisis. Can you tell us anything about what you might consider maybe some of his overlooked or lesser-known domestic policy successes? Did he have many while he was in the White House?

GALSTON: Oh, yes, he did. And of course, he had a signal foreign policy success as well, namely the Camp David Accords, which for nearly 45 years have kept the peace between two long adversaries, Egypt and Israel, who had fought a series of major wars. That was a huge accomplishment, and he deserves a lot of personal credit for it. And there were other quieter diplomatic triumphs, one of them described in the article by Bruce Riedel that you just cited.

Also domestically, there were accomplishments, although some have, I'd say, questions of the retrospect. He was the president who began the deregulation movement. You know, with the deregulation of

the airlines, in my view, as a veteran traveler, a mixed blessing. But let's not go there before complaining about small seats. And, you know, he had a very strong environmental record. He was a moral force for racial progress and reconciliation. All of this is laid out in great detail in a book that Stuart Eizenstat, his domestic policy adviser, published a couple of years ago, and it makes for a pretty impressive record. But it does confirm a maxim of mine, and that is that presidencies are defined more by their home runs and strikeouts than by their singles and doubles. And that may be unfair, but that's the way history, and, I would say, the American people keep score.

PITA: I'm glad you mention Stuart Eizenstat. You had hosted a conversation with him back when that book came out. And I'll have a link for listeners to that in the show notes for this episode. I was reading through that he mentioned in part of his remarks that Carter had come into office with the idea that -- I'm paraphrasing a little bit here, but saying that once you're elected, you park politics at the Oval Office door, that you try and do the right thing, and if you're successful, you'll be rewarded for it. And of course, y'know nowadays, we often think about the modern role of the president is almost in some cases almost nothing but politics. Whether you're wrangling the disparate members of your own party or trying to work across the aisle, that kind of thing. Can you talk a little bit about that, the idea of the role of the president and what he's or she is supposed to be doing and whether that concept has changed or was Carter's idea really just so out of step with everyone else's thinking?

GALSTON: I think more of the latter than the former. You know, ever since Franklin Roosevelt, the president is expected to be the leader of the country, the leader of his party, the source of energy, as Alexander. What Alexander Hamilton once put it in proposing policies, not just leaning back and waiting for Congress to take the lead. And as Roosevelt understood very well, getting the policy right without getting the politics right won't get you very far. Of course, the reverse is also true: if you're a political magician, but you have either an unclear agenda or a retrograde agenda that won't get you or the country very far either. And in my view, which in some respects I believe even Stuart Eizenstat shares, the president was somewhat naive in believing -- President Carter -- that you could simply you distinguish neatly between campaigning and governing. There is, to some extent a permanent campaign that is always underway, whether or not you want to participate in it, because your ability to get your way legislatively is in part driven by the perception of your strength. Politically, that members of Congress have -- I mean, there are always centrifugal forces in Congress and thus, you know, the center-seeking force, not on a political spectrum, but, in Alexander Hamilton's terms of the source of energy, what drives an agenda is the strength of the president. And that strength is measured in part in political terms. And I think President Carter came to understand that very reluctantly, but he certainly did not begin with that understanding. And I think he paid a price, especially in his first year. Now, which is not to say that the first years of presidencies typically go well, because even if you governed some other entity, there is a very steep learning curve unless you've been vice president or a heartbeat away from the presidency.

PITA: I want to ask you about one more, one more quote, one more person's idea about presidency and U.S. politics. And I feel like these tie together with your own maxim about that presidencies being judged by their home runs versus more of their singles and doubles. And Ed Luce had written in the FT recently that "the downside to U.S. political memory is that substance often counts for little." Now, in his case, his column is about the Cold War and who gets credit for winding down the Cold War and how much goes to Reagan versus what should go to Carter or not. I want to ask you about sort of just that broader idea about the substance of a presidency and the idea of governing versus the politics and and how you how you sell your presidency and how you sell your ideas. How do we think about these things? How should we think about these things? Do we risk good, good governors being overlooked because they couldn't sell? And how do you think about that as someone who thinks about these issues?

GALSTON: If policy is sound and the results are beneficial to the people, that will tend to shape the judgment, even if you're not a good salesman. Right? If you're running an economy that's growing at 3% a year with 2% inflation, I don't care how you talk about it, you're going to get credit for it. Similarly, if you're running an economy at 14% inflation, which President Carter was in 1980, again, I don't care how you talk about it. People aren't going to like it. And presidencies are judged by results. I'll give you an example from the New Deal. The beginning of the New Deal, when President Roosevelt came into office, he inherited a banking crisis. You know, the banking system had ceased to function. His very first fireside chat, which I

regard as a masterpiece and I've written about it, was on banking and the restoration of confidence in the banking system and how the steps that he was taking or proposing to take contributed to that. But we wouldn't remember that fireside chat as a success if the measures he took had not succeeded in restoring confidence in the system and very quickly reopening the banks, except for the ones that were clearly insolvent, that had to be shuttered and recreated in some other form. I don't think the problem with the Carter presidency, particularly at the end, was the way the president and his chief backers talked about it. You know, the problem was what people were experiencing on Election Day.

Let me now take up another piece of the question that you posed having to do with the timing. If one president plants a seed and the next one harvests the crop, is it, you know, is it fair that the harvester gets more credit than the planter? It may not be fair, but it's the way it is.

But let me take up the particular example of the Cold War. Ed Luce is right that the pivot towards a defense posture that was more consistent with confronting the Soviet Union, you know, than compromising with the Soviet Union, which was really the position that Henry Kissinger had been advocating when he was national security advisor and secretary of state. That is true. But if you go back a little farther, you will find that until the invasion of Afghanistan in December of 1979, the Carter administration was pursuing or at least projecting a very different orientation. And President Carter was heard to remark shortly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that that event had totally transformed his view of the Soviet Union. And it is also the case that when he came into office in 1977, he brought with him into his administration the unresolved debate within the Democratic Party between hawks and doves. His national security advisor was Zbigniew Brzezinski, a noted hawk. His secretary of state was Cyrus Vance, you know, a pretty unabashed dove. And frequently he would receive competing and indeed incompatible advice and even speech drafts from inside the White House, as vetted by the national security advisor and from the State Department as vetted by Cy Vance. And, you know, he gave one speech that I think a not-hostile critic described as stapling the two halves of discordant approach together. So, does Carter get credit for having the scales fall from his eyes and rearranging in United States foreign and defense policy in a more hawkish direction after Afghanistan? Yes, absolutely. But in my judgment, he was not exactly sounding a, you know, a loud and certain trumpet before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. So, once again, I would say a mixed verdict.

PITA: All right. Well, let's wrap up maybe just with what to you is President Carter's most lasting legacy, whether it's something from his presidency or from his post-presidential career?

GALSTON: Well, I think from the standpoint of the world, securing peace between Israel and Egypt was the single most important accomplishment because it paved the way for other agreements that -- with Jordan and other countries in the region, and then most recently, the Abraham Accords -- that have dramatically, I believe, improved the prospects for peace in the region. That includes Israel and its neighbors. Israel and its neighbors versus Iran is a different question altogether. But I think Carter gets a lot of credit, at least in my book, for that first breakthrough, which involved a lot of very hard, painstaking personal diplomacy on his part and probably would not have succeeded without him.

PITA: All right. Well, Bill, thank you so much for talking with us today and and remembering President Carter's career.

GALSTON: My pleasure.