

# Jimmy Carter's life after the presidency set a bar that few others have reached

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Carter was a man of extraordinary integrity. No president after him succeeded at doing as much post-White House good



📷 'He was the only 20th-century president to move back into the (very modest) house in which he had lived before.' Photograph: John Amis/Reuters

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Jimmy Carter's presidency has been etched into historical memory as a failure. That judgment is curious, particularly when it comes from American conservatives; many of the right's favorite policies – deregulation and a ruthless fight against inflation, no matter the cost in unemployment – were actually started under Carter. Of course, the more that malaise can be associated with the peanut farmer from Georgia, the shinier becomes his successor, Ronald Reagan, conservatism's greatest 20th-century hero.

What should be beyond dispute is that Carter was the most successful ex-president of the postwar period, and perhaps [the greatest former president](#),

period. That has a lot to do with his sheer integrity. But the fact that no former chief executive after Carter managed to emulate his model – using their skills and access to do genuinely important things in politics, rather than mostly cashing in – says much about our times.

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True, it is a luxury problem most of us don't face, but the post-presidency is bound to put any politician in an awkward position: either one has been fired by the people or frustrated by term limits. Only once has a politician come back to win the White House after losing it (Grover Cleveland); and there's only one instance in which a former head of the executive managed to become equally successful in another branch of government (William Howard Taft, who was made chief justice). So what's one supposed to do, other than write a book that many will buy but few will read? Or, at least, no one will remember: no memorable insight has ever emerged from a presidential memoir.

*Public service should be a calling, not something for which one ought to expect extraordinary financial compensation later on*

Carter apparently went through [a difficult, depressive phase](#) after being defeated by Reagan in a landslide. But, only 56 at the time, he resolved to use his talent and prominence to improve democratic politics, speed along whatever might have looked like a plausible “peace process” somewhere (building on his still unmatched success with the [Middle East accords at Camp David](#)) and to engage in a global fight to [eradicate guinea worm](#). He was the only 20th-century president to move back into the (very modest) house in which he had lived before; as one observer pointed out, the house was [assessed at](#) less than the Secret Service vehicles parked outside it.

Others took different paths: Ford had already started [the trend of profiting from the presidency](#), especially through lucrative speeches; he did not, however, make a show of being part of the international jet set. Obviously, there's a danger in making such observations that one simply echoes the relentless rightwing attacks on the Clintons; but the fact remains that [flying on Jeffrey Epstein's plane](#) and [giving speeches at Wall Street firms](#) for six figures demonstrate poor judgment: those decisions reinforce the sense that a political class lives in a world utterly separate from us. Even if there is no direct quid pro quo (that is not really how lobbying works anyway), speaking for money can confirm suspicions that politicians are for sale. After all, the private sector buys their presence (“look who we can get!”), not their performance, and thereby demonstrates its power.

Former politicians lose power, but not influence, as Bill Clinton once put it. They can sell access to the highest bidder, or start their own lobbying or what is sometimes coyly called an “investment advisory firm”. The justification that some immensely talented individuals opted for government and thereby decided to forego massive amounts of money – hence it’s OK for them to cash in later – misses the point that public service should be a calling, not something for which one ought to expect extraordinary financial compensation later on.

*Carter modelled the notion that public service is something an individual can sincerely sustain over a lifetime*

As a figure in the classic interwar film *Rules of the Game* observes, everyone has their reasons. Clinton needed to pay off his debts from years of lawsuits; George W Bush was so disgraced by his disastrous presidency that any attempt at a political role after 2008 would have been greeted with derision at best. But observers may have been audacious enough to hope that Obama was going to make special use of his prestige and intellectual talents. Alas, the memoir he wrote turned out to be flat, failing to match the self-awareness and philosophical depth of his earlier books. And making a show of frolicking in the Caribbean with Richard Branson on the latter’s private island not only reinforced the sense that glamour is one currency one can expect after the hard work of the presidency; it also revealed the assumption – shared by Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder and many other leftwing leaders who made their peace with neoliberalism – that to be able to do anything effective in the world at all, one must partner with private wealth.

Carter not only resisted the glamour, he worked patiently for well-chosen projects. (Contrast Clinton, who despite his extraordinary political skills and acute sense of policy lacked focus in his post-White House years, just as had been the case during his presidency.) True, Carter could also be “booked” at a speakers’ agency – for between 100 and 200 grand, being put in the “Lifestyle” category alongside “Political Speakers”. But, overall, he modelled the notion that public service is nothing that needs a payoff eventually or must be made dependent on the wealthy; rather, it is something an individual can sincerely sustain over a lifetime.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/dec/30/jimmy-carter-post-presidency-life-public-service>