

Inquisitive president: The quest for peace

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [December 26, 2006](#) issue

In his book *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, Jimmy Carter declares that “one of the major goals of my life, while in political office and since I was retired from the White House by the 1980 election, has been to help ensure a lasting peace for Israelis and others in the Middle East.” His book describes the quest of an inquisitive president, one who wants to know what we can do about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Before moving to Washington, Carter was determined to learn “all I could about Israel and its political and military challenges,” an acknowledgment that up to that point his life had been shaped by the Israeli narrative—the story that described the relationship between Jews and Arabs entirely from the Israeli perspective.

Carter’s experience is the same as that of many other American travelers to the Mideast: it starts with a fondness for biblical history and an admiration for the courage of a people who suffered through the Holocaust. While governor of Georgia, Carter made the obligatory political trip to Israel, which was especially meaningful to him because of his Southern Baptist roots. His Israeli hosts did not take him into Palestinian areas, however, as they preferred to shield him from a competing narrative.

Dominant powers survive by controlling the narrative that works for them. Moshe Dayan once said that a single Palestinian tour guide in the West Bank was more dangerous to Israel than an Arab fighter pilot—an honest observation from an Israeli leader who knew the importance of controlling the narrative.

But Jimmy Carter was an inquisitive president: he always wanted to know more. He also knew that the dominant and therefore controlling narrative always has the potential to inflict suffering on those it controls. Carter is, after all, a native of the American South, where the white segregationist narrative was once the only one. By the time he took the oath of office in January 1977, Carter had been studying the Mideast and was ready to work on a peace plan that would benefit Israel and its

Arab neighbors, including the Palestinians.

Carter knew that his goal of peace for the region would be difficult to obtain because of the dominance of the Israeli narrative in American politics. (I once asked a prominent Illinois politician if he would be open to learning more about the Palestinians' situation. His curt response hardly suggested a Carter-like quest for knowledge.)

The new president also knew that an American chief executive could take unilateral foreign-policy actions for peace as well as for war. In March 1977, two months after assuming the presidency, Carter made a dramatic statement: "There has to be a homeland provided for the Palestinian refugees who have suffered for many, many years." The attacks from Israel's supporters were immediate and intense, but Carter wasn't deterred. The president could and did act for peace on his own.

Two weeks after Carter's call for a Palestinian homeland, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat made a state visit to Washington. After the official banquet the two leaders went upstairs to the president's living quarters and, as Carter reports, "during a long, private conversation it became obvious that [Sadat] wanted to work with me on peace negotiations." A strong friendship developed. "Of almost a hundred heads of state with whom I met while president," says Carter, "he was my favorite and my closest personal friend."

Eight months after that meeting, on November 19, 1977, Sadat made a dramatic flight to Tel Aviv to speak to the Israeli Knesset, declaring that his visit was an "important juncture in the history of the world." After restating Arab demands, including Israeli withdrawal from war-won lands and a permanent home for the Palestinians, Sadat said: "I wish to tell you today and I proclaim to the whole world: We accept to live with you in a lasting and just peace."

Within a year, Carter persuaded Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin to join him and Sadat for peace discussions at Camp David. After three arduous weeks of intense negotiations, Sadat and Begin signed a peace agreement between Israel and Egypt. Carter was able, because of his drive to learn about a complex foreign-policy issue, his passion for peace and human rights, and his strong personal relationship with Sadat, to take a major step for peace in the Middle East—something no other American politician has had the courage to do.

Carter reports that he also relied on friends within the Israeli government during the Camp David meeting, especially Ezer Weizman, Israel's defense minister. Weizman, Carter writes, "had been a leading 'hawk' all his life but was converted during the weeks of negotiations into a strong proponent of reconciliation with the Arabs." The two men remained good friends until Weizman's death in 1993.

Since leaving the White House, Carter has seen his successors ignore the Palestinian narrative and automatically acquiesce to whatever demands Israel makes on its U.S. partner, especially in the Clinton years and in the current Bush White House. The recent election promises no change on that front.

A few days before Carter's book was published, House speaker-to-be Nancy Pelosi and Democratic Party chair Howard Dean, armed with selected quotes, rushed forward to announce that Carter does not speak for their party—news that will come as no surprise to those who read the book.