Can lessons from Plains reach beyond Mr. Jimmy's Sunday School class?

by Patrik Jonsson

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(*The Christian Science Monitor*) When the Methodist church in Plains, Georgia, puts on its annual fish fry, the congregation is usually nearly the whole town of 700 people. Baptists like Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter are sure to be in attendance, as is mechanic Chris McGrady, a young black man who calls Carter “probably the best president ever.”

Before Mr. Jimmy, as he is called here, became president, Plains was cloven by race, if not religion, and Carter breached protocol and tradition and risked a political career in the 1960s by voting against a resolution to exclude black churchgoers. Carter’s focus on human rights, especially post-presidency, came to touch millions around the world. But its success can be perhaps most easily seen in Plains, a town so flat that “water don’t know which way to run,” and where residents say Carter “sets the tone” and “keeps our mind open.”

Carter and his hometown are “seeing a revival,” said Bob Strong, a Washington and Lee University political scientist, partly because of Carter’s advancing age, but also because the values that the town embodies—hard work, duty, grace, faith, dignity, and equality—are poignant counterpoints as a country polarized by race, class, and opportunity begins to seek its 45th president.

Carter’s return to Plains, historians say, strikes at least a faint chord at a time when aspiring presidents like Donald Trump and Ted Cruz vilify farm workers and decry progressives.

Renewed interest in Carter and Plains “is part of a long historical tradition of Americans looking to the South and genteel characters who cling to humane values as a counterpoint to the new mechanized, impersonal, and corporate America that has emerged,” said Dan Carter, an emeritus history professor at the University of South Carolina. “It’s a kind of nostalgia that’s not really based on reality, but it does embody a set of values that Americans still, even while they love the bombast and

self-centered narcissism of a Donald Trump, long for, and that we associate with a small town, a rural community, where people look out for each other.”

As he has in times of both joy and despair, including a landslide loss to Ronald Reagan in 1980, Carter returned last week to Plains with a difficult medical diagnosis, sparking a pilgrimage of nearly 1,000 people to Carter’s regular Sunday School class. To accommodate the crowds, the former president, ever dutiful, taught a second class at a local school gymnasium.

“You have heard it was said that you will love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Carter said, quoting Matthew. “How would the world be changed if everyone—Syrians, Iranians, Israelis, Palestinians . . . Republicans and Democrats—adopted Christ’s definition of love.”

Cricket Keating, a visitor from Ohio, told the *New York Times* last Sunday that she was drawn to Plains by Carter's "irrepressible joy.” She told the newspaper that she felt humbled by Carter’s words. "No matter how bad things are, we have company in this world," she said.

To be sure, it was Carter’s ascent to the pinnacle of power from being a farm boy who sold boiled peanuts for pocket money that enshrined Plains in the global consciousness. The peanut-centric town draws thousands of tourists a year, many of whom come to hear Carter’s regular Sunday School class at Maranatha Baptist Church.

Today, the entire town is a national historic site, a nostalgic drift into the past, epitomized by the Department of the Interior’s management of Carter’s boyhood farm in nearby Archery, where chickens still cluck and screen doors are open and doors unlocked for visitors to ramble through. Carter writes in *An Hour Before Daylight*, a memoir, that Plains “seems to have citizens who are exceptionally inclined to resist moving away to distant places.”

To be sure, at the heart of the town’s appeal is the idyllic idea of a lanky Southern boy kicking through its red dust, dreaming of the navy, earning a nuclear physics degree, then going back to Plains to manage his father’s peanut business while laying the foundations for a political career that would take him first to the Governor's Mansion in Atlanta and then to the White House.

Residents' affinity, at the same time, runs deep for Mr. Jimmy and Miss Rosalynn, who were seen strolling through town on Wednesday. The sight was a relief, as locals worried that Sunday's twin Bible lessons had exhausted the president. When someone sends banana bread, Ms. Rosalynn always sends a note of thanks back.

After all, it was Plains that gave Carter the support to lick the wounds of his bitter defeat against Reagan in 1980, and begin a remarkable post-presidency that has improved health and lives for people around the world.

"Carter's kind of a unique person in that his roots go down into small town America more legitimately and more authentically than any president I can think of, certainly in the 20th or 21st centuries," said Randall Balmer, author of *Redeemer: The Life of Jimmy Carter*. "The importance of Plains to Carter is that he comes back after the presidency, regroups, figured out his life, and decides, as a result of being awake in the middle of the night, to start the Carter Center. But earlier, in 1966, after losing his first try for governor in Georgia, he also goes back to Plains and has a spiritual renewal that really does kind of reconfigure his life."

For some political scientists, Carter's journey has come to define the southern evolution on race, informed by both his father's rigid adherence to Jim Crow social standards and his mother's rejection of them. While largely on the sidelines of the Civil Rights movement, Carter built his governorship and presidential run on social justice, including the rights of black people and Hispanic farm workers. Today, Donald Trump, the Republican front runner, has suggested rounding up 11 million undocumented workers, including 4 million of their children who are U.S. citizens, and deporting them all.

Already, Trump, by some, has been compared to George Wallace, the segregationist former Alabama governor whom Carter beat in the 1976 Florida primary. Wallace stoked white fears of an emboldened minority, much as Trump does today.

But Carter, instead, represents the alternate historical current in the South, where his human rights and health-care work across the globe has been largely fueled by the profound changes that he witnessed as the South reckoned with institutional racism.

"Carter saw in the South what brave people standing up speaking the truth can accomplish," said Strong, the Washington and Lee professor. "If we say what's right about human rights, it's not going to instantly change the world, but it has real

power.”

Carter’s decision to lean on Plains in times of hardship goes beyond his childhood bonds to the place that shaped the 39th president. Carter recently decided that, when the time comes, he will be laid to rest in Plains, not at the Carter Center, his “mini-United Nations” in Atlanta. That’s in part to ensure that Plains will remain a pilgrimage destination for those wanting to understand how America’s rural values turned a Georgia farm boy into an international pioneer of human rights.

Even as Plains worries about the health of its favorite son, Carter, in turn, “is worried about his little town,” said Philip Kurland, who runs the Plains Trading Post.