

Jimmy Carter's 91 years

By [Randall Balmer](#)

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Jimmy Carter, the 39th president of the United States, turns 91 years old on Thursday. By any reckoning, he has led a remarkable life.

Anyone who visits Plains, in southwest Georgia, and especially the Carter farmstead three miles down the road in Archery, cannot fail to be impressed by the simplicity of Carter's background. Carter himself has never complained about the circumstances of his childhood, and in fact has often made the point that his family was more prosperous than their neighbors. But the Carter farmhouse lacked indoor plumbing during Jimmy Carter's childhood, and it wasn't until Carter was 14 years old that Franklin Roosevelt's Rural Electrification Agency brought the wonders of electricity to Archery.

Carter walked three miles to school and back, often barefoot. He was acutely conscious of his status as a "country boy," but he studied hard and read diligently. His favorite teacher, Julia Coleman, often remarked that one of her students might be president of the United States someday. Young Jimmy Carter was listening.

After graduating from Plains high school, Carter attended the U.S. Naval Academy and, upon graduation, was commissioned as an ensign. Together with his new wife, the former Rosalynn Smith, they embarked on a career in the navy.

In 1953, however, Carter was summoned back to Plains. His father, known in the community as Mr. Earl, was dying. As Jimmy Carter stood at his father's bedside, he listened as countless members of the community came to pay their respects and to thank Mr. Earl for small acts of kindness: extending credit from the Carter store, carrying their mortgage in times of financial stringency, providing new clothes for a poor family so they could attend their daughter's graduation with pride.

When Jimmy Carter returned to Schenectady, New York, where the family was stationed at the time, he informed Rosalynn that he was resigning his commission to return to Plains to try to have the kind of influence on the community that his father did.

The rest, as they say, is history: a Georgia state senator, governor, then—after an improbable run for the office—president of the United States. I believe it is impossible to imagine Jimmy Carter becoming president had it not been for Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Johnson had lied to us about Vietnam; Nixon had lied about . . . pretty much everything. We needed to know that our president had a moral compass, and Carter, a Southern Baptist Sunday-school teacher, arrived on the scene and promised that he would never knowingly lie to the American people.

We elected him president in 1976. The country was in a mess when Carter took office in 1977: the lingering scars of the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Arab oil embargo, runaway inflation, and soaring interest rates.

Carter's presidency is not generally considered a successful one, and I would be hard pressed to argue otherwise. But historians have a way of revisiting the past, and now, nearly 35 years since Carter left the White House, they are beginning to appreciate some of his accomplishments: the Camp David Accords, renegotiation of the Panama Canal treaty, emphasis on human rights, his calls for energy independence. Carter appointed more women and minorities to office than any president before him, and many conservationists consider him the best environmental president ever.

Carter's devastating loss in his bid for a second term in 1980 might have persuaded a lesser person to retire quietly to Plains. But Carter had other ideas. The Carter Center, founded in 1982, has compiled a remarkable record of helping to avert military conflicts and eradicate disease. As Carter conceded in one of our conversations, he very likely would not have done any of these things had he been elected to a second term.

My favorite quote about Carter comes from James Laney, the former president of Emory University. "Jimmy Carter is the only person in history," Laney said, "for whom the presidency was a steppingstone."

Carter hates that quote, but he is generally regarded as the best ex-president in American history. And now that the partisan gloss his political adversaries have painted is beginning to fade, historians are coming around to view his presidency more favorably.

That's not a bad birthday present for someone turning 91.

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