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JIMMY CARTER INTERVIEW
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JIMMY CARTER
39th U.S. President
Interviewed by Hugh Sidey
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ON SCREEN TEXT:
The American President
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ON SCREEN TEXT:
Jimmy Carter
39th U.S. President

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HUGH SIDEY
Mr. President, you're being categorized in this episode here as a man of independent cast of mind. You take your place with other presidents of that nature. Is that a fair assessment of you, that you entered office really feeling that independence?

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JIMMY CARTER

Well it's true. I was the first president in more than 125 years elected from the deep South. I was a governor who had not been involved in any way in Washington. When I began my campaign, there were 8 or 9 others, much more famous than I was and who had a cadre of supporters that I didn't have. So I ran the early stages of my campaign as a lonely Georgian farmer who was reaching out for personal support. And I built a, ...I built that support around newcomers to politics. When I finally got the nomination I wasn't obligated to any special interest.

HUGH SIDNEY

So that was a strength really.

JIMMY CARTER

That was a strength but then after I got the nomination, you know, I was, I would say, burdened with the responsibilities of leading a massive Democratic party organization with which I had not previously been associated very much. So I went to the White House with my own ideas about what ought to be done in the Middle East, what ought to be done regarding China, what ought to be done about energy - the energy crisis. As a governor I had administered the laws that Congress had passed and I was thoroughly familiar with the defects and assets in these various laws. And I never did fit in really with a— with the Washington environment much - either socially or sometimes...

00:02:02:00

HUGH SIDEY

Still the outsider when you...

JIMMY CARTER

I was and I didn't want to be, but I think it was almost inherent in my background, my educational background ... I was a military person who had been in the agribusiness field ... but I felt sometimes that I was an outsider, but I relaxed with it. But I think that I did have an independent set of mind.

HUGH SIDEY

You quoted Kierkegaard, that every man is an exception. What's you mean by that?

JIMMY CARTER

Well I think the individuality of human beings ought to be recognized. You know we have such a heterogeneous society here in the United States with people from all nations in the world, and as I travel around in Africa and Asia, particularly the small countries, the struggling countries, the fearful countries, the ones that are deprived, they look on the United States as a ... potentially, a super power in every respect, but they feel a kinship with the United States of America even when they don't agree with our government policies, because they've got kinfolks here. And so I think the recognition of the worth of an individual is a basic premise on which human rights have to be founded. As we, including myself, as we look upon ourselves as especially privileged in societal terms or in religious

terms in the eyes of God, we exalt ourselves above others and in the extreme cases we even dehumanize those who disagree with us and think that we are absolutely right. It's the basis for I'd say religious and other fundamentalism where I am right, everyone else who disagrees with me is wrong. Therefore they are inferior in the sight of God. Therefore what I do to them is...does not have a moral constraint. And in some extreme cases, as I said, they are almost dehumanized as animals and therefore OK for them to lose their lives or to be abused.

HUGH SIDEY

That was the basis of your human rights program then that infused your whole administration.

00:04:12:00

JIMMY CARTER

And I think the thrust of it, the vitality of it, was derived, from my experience, in the deep South. As someone who grew up in segregation years, who had to struggle through that ordeal of change, and who saw the burden of segregation being equally heavy on white people as it was on our African American neighbors. It was a millstone around our neck. And I saw the advantages of treating people equally, and as I said long before I was elected president, in my campaign speeches, that if I am elected human rights would be a foundation stone for the building of our foreign policy.

HUGH SIDEY

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Did you think at any time you confused people about which party you belonged to or what your political theology was really?

00:05:04:00

JIMMY CARTER

Well I think so. There were a lot of articles written permeated by consternation about how do you put this President Carter in a box. How do you define him? Is he a liberal? Is he conservative? Is he a warrior? Is he a peacemaker? Is he too idealistic? Is he too pragmatic? But I never did try to create that confusion. My comprehension of myself was fairly complete, I guess. And I haven't changed. I mean there's not as much either interest or skepticism or quizzical attitudes toward me now. I'm the same as I was.

HUGH SIDEY

Should we have a third party, a new party?

JIMMY CARTER

I think it would be good.

HUGH SIDEY

You think it would be good?

JIMMY CARTER

Yeah. We've had a good chance here in the 1996 era with Ross Perot having established a basis for funding with his 19 or 20%, whatever he got in 1992. But I

think he has wasted the opportunity for the third party to be established by letting it be his own personal possession. And it's so difficult in this country. We monitor elections all over the world and I would not go into a country even to try to monitor a fair election if it had the same policies that we have in this country on holding elections. We're the only nation in the world that doesn't give equal free time to all candidates. And it means that anyone who wants to be a viable candidate for President, or even for Congress, has to have enormous financial wealth, personally or appeal to special interest groups to finance a very expensive campaign. That's unique with our country. It doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. And it's an unrecognized blight on the democratic nature of our country. So it's almost impossible, just because of the financial barrier, to create any kind of third party interest.

HUGH SIDEY

Let's dig back a little into your boyhood and how your whole attitude evolved. When was the first time you saw the White House?

00:07:12:00

JIMMY CARTER

It was when I was a midshipman at the Naval Academy.

HUGH SIDEY

What's the first president you really knew about?

JIMMY CARTER

Franklin Roosevelt.

HUGH SIDEY

Would you tell me that story about your father, though, and Franklin Roosevelt.

JIMMY CARTER

Well, you know, there were no Republicans identifiable in Georgia when I grew up except just a few who would take post office jobs when a Republican was in the White House. It was a token group that handed out political favors. So my father, as did almost everyone else, voted for Roosevelt in 1932. Subsequently, with the New Deal policies, Roosevelt instituted tight government controls over agriculture, which were a very serious violation of my Daddy's basic political philosophy. And the straw that broke the camel's back was when, I think in the spring of 1935, in order to qualify for any kind of price support, cotton was 5 cents a pound, peanuts were 1 cent a pound, hogs were 1 cent a pound ... it was a disastrous time. Roosevelt required that farmers plow up a substantial part of their cotton which at that time was almost knee high. And to kill a certain portion of our shoat, the young pigs. Daddy thought this was totalitarian government policy and in subsequent elections he would never vote for Roosevelt again.

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HUGH SIDEY

Your father was a great influence, though, on you.

JIMMY CARTER

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Yes he was.

HUGH SIDEY

Uh, you went to work early in the fields? You said something about he whipped you when you were...

JIMMY CARTER

I remember five or six whippings very vividly.

HUGH SIDEY

Still.

JIMMY CARTER

I don't say I didn't deserve them but, yes. Well, Daddy worked harder than anyone else on our farm. We lived in an isolated place. All our neighbors were African American. My playmates were Black kids. And the standard salary then for a day worker was a dollar a day. Women who were very good, seventy-five cents a day. Teenage children, fifty cents a day. Little kids, under teenage were 25 cents a day. And that meant that you went to the barn in the dark. You got your particular mule. You hooked it to the wagon. You put your plow on the wagon. You got to the field, hooked up your mule and when it got bright enough so that the mule wouldn't plow up any cotton, you started plowing and you didn't stop until sundown. Then you came in. We didn't have electricity 'til I was 14 years

old. We had to pump water, feed the livestock and go to bed at dark. And we rarely stayed up in our house after 8 o'clock in the evening.

HUGH SIDEY

You quoted your father in some of your writings, that he told you “everything that occupies space must produce.”

00:10:06:00

JIMMY CARTER

Well, that's right. In fact one of my poems about that...everything on the farm had to pay its own way. Daddy didn't look on...

HUGH SIDEY

How strong an influence your mother? Your father obviously left his mark. But your mother, in what way?

JIMMY CARTER

Well powerful. Mother was a liberal in Plains, Georgia in 1935 and '45 and '55. She never would acknowledge the acceptability of racial discrimination. She was a registered nurse, who in our little isolated community, was almost the equivalent of a medical doctor. She worked for the doctors in Plains and she would treat the patients who came to our home and whose homes she visited all that time. So Mother was looked upon by her neighbors, her friends even, as a very strange creature. And, but she was so strong willed that she was immune to criticism. In fact criticism didn't bother her much. So although I always looked upon my father

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as a dominant force in our family, I came to realize as I grew older, that Mother and Daddy had a relationship where Mother's influence was very powerful, although Daddy made the final decisions, I would say. And so Mother would...has been, I would say, in the long term, a greater influence on me perhaps than my father has.

HUGH SIDEY

Well she followed you to the White House. She got there. I remember her there.

JIMMY CARTER

She helped me get there. And, yes, she was very active while I was president.

00:11:43:00

HUGH SIDEY

Was it a happy childhood?

JIMMY CARTER

Very happy. We had a good life. We lived, along with everyone else, with no money, no electricity, no running water, hard work, and things of that kind. But our family never did suffer for food or shelter and things of that kind.

HUGH SIDEY

Did you have your heart in being a military man?

JIMMY CARTER

Yes, that was my only heart.

HUGH SIDEY

Really, where did that come from?

00:12:09:00

JIMMY CARTER

You know, if you had asked me when I was 5 years old or 8 years old or whatever, what do you want to be when you grow up? It was always, I want to go to Annapolis and be a naval officer. My father was a 1st lieutenant in the 1st World War and no one on my daddy's side since the 1600s had ever finished high school. Daddy went through the 10th grade. They were all farmers, dirt farmers. Mother's side was more educated. And my father's ambition for me was to go to college, but growing up during the depression years, there was no thought of being able to pay our way through college. And the only 2 free universities in the nation were West Point and Annapolis. I chose Annapolis because of my admiration for my mother's youngest brother who was a full time professional sailor, and he was kind of a hero of mine in the distant Pacific. So my mind was made up and until I was past 30 years old, my only ambition was to be a successful naval officer.

HUGH SIDEY

Was it hard to leave the service when your father died and you go back home?

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JIMMY CARTER

Yes, that was one of the worst things that I have ever done. I prayed about it. I labored over it, and I was afraid to tell Rosalyn that I was even considering it. When I finally told her that, it almost broke up our marriage. We have never had a more serious confrontation. When I finally resigned from the Navy, we had three little boys. We drove from Schenectady, NY, where I was working on a nuclear submarine, back to Plains. She hardly said a word to me on the way home. And for six months after we got back to Plains, she didn't cooperate in many ways. She was devastated and I was too, in a way. And when we got back to Plains, where I was determined to go and to stay, we were faced with terrible economic circumstances. We didn't have any money. We lived in a government housing project. The first entire year I was home, our income was less than \$300. The next year, because we were looked at as, quote, liberal on the race issue, we had boycotts organized against our business. But we stuck it out and I never have really had doubt that I made the right decision in going back home.

HUGH SIDEY

And then you began to move into politics. What prompted that?

00:14:47:00

JIMMY CARTER

My first political position was on the Sumter County school board and then I became chairman very quickly because I was a very eager young man. It was during the horrible transition phase from total segregation to the vestiges of integration. And then all of the big shot politicians in Georgia, even the so-called progressive ones, swore that a Black child would never enter a white classroom.

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If so the public school system would shut down. I decided to run for the Georgia Senate. When I got to Atlanta, finally, the only request I made was that I be put on the education committee. I had a vision of saving the education system of Georgia. And after 4 years in the Senate, I ran for Governor and so it was...

HUGH SIDEY

And you lost some time in there.

JIMMY CARTER

I lost the first time.

HUGH SIDEY

And you felt very badly about that.

JIMMY CARTER

I lost the first campaign in 1966, yes. And the reason I felt bad was that the avowed and very proud segregationist, Lester Maddox, was the eventual winner. And I couldn't understand how the Georgia people would choose him, instead of a fine young man like me. I couldn't understand how God would permit something like this to happen, that a segregationist would be elected Governor of Georgia. But I kept on campaigning and the next time I went...

00:16:08:00

HUGH SIDEY

But now, that's when you said you said you were born again, or your faith renewed, or is that an exaggeration?

JIMMY CARTER

Well the born again thing has been very highly...and misinterpreted by many people. I've always been, since a child, a Christian, I've always been fairly devout. But I was disillusioned then about God's purpose for my life. I thought my life, I certainly thought my political life was over in 1966. And my sister, Ruth Stapleton, Ruth Carter Stapleton, was a very famous evangelist then, with 5 books and lecture series and major speeches. She was very famous. And she came down to our place after I was defeated. She drove down from Fayetteville, NC. And we went out on a ...spent some time together. I told her that my political life was over. I was doomed to be just growing peanuts for the rest of my existence, that I felt disillusioned, that God had no interest in the future of my life and so forth. And she convinced me by quoting a passage in the book of James, that those kinds of tragedies or setbacks should be the foundation for a greater life, for renewed vigor and confidence and purpose, for reassessment of what we have done, and was not a cause for despair or alienation. And I said "Ruth, that's complete bologna. My political life is over." And she said, "Well, just have faith and do the best you can." So I began to campaign again and in 1970 I was elected.

00:17:47:00

HUGH SIDEY

I see. When did you realize that you might be able to go to the White House - all the way? Did it occur then or later when you were governor?

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JIMMY CARTER

No. I had no ambition to run for president when I was elected governor. In 1972, when McGovern was nominated, I and a group of other Southern governors were hoping to be tapped as vice president, but that was not the case. So within a few months of the 1972 convention in Miami, I began to plan, secretly, to run for president - only about 5 or 6 of us knew it. This was after I'd been governor about a year or so.

HUGH SIDEY

You would have taken the vice presidential nomination.

JIMMY CARTER

Yes, I would have taken that.

HUGH SIDEY

Did you try to...did you talk to him about that?

JIMMY CARTER

Never. No. But I was hoping that he'd see me as an attractive addition to the ticket. And even if we didn't get elected, I thought it would give me kind of a springboard to the future.

HUGH SIDEY

It might have helped him a little bit.

JIMMY CARTER

Well, I'm not sure about that.

HUGH SIDEY

You remember the Eagleton disaster. He had to go through that whole unfortunate episode.

00:19:00:00

JIMMY CARTER

But I And then by the time I announced in 1974, nobody cared. Nobody thought I had a chance. But I was confident that our plans...our strategy would pay off. And I was never...I never lost confidence. And we had step by step check off points. We were always far ahead of where we anticipated being during the campaign itself.

HUGH SIDEY

That was a hard grind though wasn't it? It was years of, again, discipline. I remember you out in my native state of Iowa, there with your suit bag and going with your people, the peanut brigade people that came there. Boy, that's a...how did you keep them all on the job?

JIMMY CARTER

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Well, the first year, 1975, was a lonely existence. In Iowa, I visited 135 cities and towns in Iowa, and I would just look for somebody with a notebook, thinking it might be a news reporter and I rarely could get on radio, and never on television, but I just went from one town to another and would go and speak to college classes - maybe 20 people would come. I remember once I went to Des Moines and spent a lot of money to have a big reception, and had refreshments there and so forth, and 2 people came - in a great big ballroom in a hotel in Des Moines. I stayed there about a half an hour and then I left the hotel, walked down the street to the courthouse and I shook hands with everybody that worked at the courthouse.

HUGH SIDEY

Didn't that discourage you?

00:20:31:00

JIMMY CARTER

Oh yes it did. But um...

HUGH SIDEY

How did you cope with that?

JIMMY CARTER

Just kept working.

HUGH SIDEY

Your faith again.

JIMMY CARTER

Well, it wasn't just religious faith. It was faith in myself and... we had a very secret weapon at our disposal. When other candidates, there were nine prominent candidates, were campaigning, taking time off from their duties in Washington most of them, I was campaigning, my wife was campaigning in a separate place and in other separate places, my son Jack and his wife, Chip and his wife, Jeff and his wife, my mother and my Aunt Sissy ... We had 7 or 8 simultaneous campaigns going on all the time. Every weekend, on Saturday we'd go back to Plains. We would share ideas, share notes, make sure we were speaking with the same voice. Monday morning we'd be out standing in the factory shift lines. So we covered the... Iowa and Florida and New Hampshire... far beyond what anyone else could do, not with TV ads, but with just personal visits. And it was out of that 1st stage of success that the Peanut Brigade came and then I had hundreds of Georgians going out to do the same thing. So that was really the secret of our success.

HUGH SIDEY

How important was it to not be perceived as just a Southerner? Did you try to change that image?

00:21:50:00

JIMMY CARTER

Yes I did. The first time I went to Massachusetts, for instance, I was looked on as a curiosity, although the folks in Boston were very interested in politics. They paid attention to me even though I was a kind of a weirdo Southerner. And the 1st question I got from a television reporter was, “Why should Massachusetts people vote for you, who come from way down south?” And I said, “When John Kennedy ran for president, he got a higher percentage of votes in Georgia than he did in Massachusetts. And so we were loyal to your candidate, so we deserve some credit up here.” So eventually we did pretty well in Massachusetts.

00:22:29:00

HUGH SIDEY

Let’s move on here to winning the White House. Let’s start at the back first, was it worth it?

JIMMY CARTER

Yes, it was.

HUGH SIDEY

All those years of planning and tedious discipline?

JIMMY CARTER

Well, let’s see. I guess you might say it’s the greatest thing that ever happened to me in a public way. I enjoyed being president, I was proud of my country, proud of the honor that I received, and had confidence in what I did was the right thing when I was president. I looked forward every morning to getting to the Oval

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Office to face the day. Sometimes I was disappointed when I got there. There might have been things that I couldn't quite help.

HUGH SIDEY

When did you realize you'd won?

00:23:11:00

JIMMY CARTER

Well, it wasn't until the final returns came in from the state of Mississippi that I went over the top and defeated President Ford, who was a good man and had the deserved gratitude of the country. So it was a close..

HUGH SIDEY

How did you feel?

JIMMY CARTER

Exhilarated, tired, ambitious and then we did as much preparation before I got to the White House as anyone could possibly do. We had a very clear agenda the day I was inaugurated. I prepared the first budget before I was ever president. I was thoroughly familiar with the military secrets, you know, before I approached the responsibilities and so forth. So we had a good preparation.

HUGH SIDEY

How did you feel on the inaugural stand?

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JIMMY CARTER

Again, very proud and humble. I made a very brief speech. One of the most brief presidential texts that ever was. I wrote it all myself. And then we had made some very secret arrangements to get out of the limousine and walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, but the only thing that the Secret Service asked was that we not reveal this in advance. So we got down off the reviewing stand where I made my inaugural speech, drove around the Capitol and stopped the limousine, got out and walked down Pennsylvania Ave. So that whole inaugural process was very exciting and kind of adventurous for us.

HUGH SIDEY

Tell me about your first moments in the White House. When you first entered, how'd you feel?

00:24:56:00

JIMMY CARTER

I had a good tour, obviously, after I was the president, but to go in and see the desk that Thomas Jefferson tied on the back of his horse and used and to see Abraham Lincoln's room and to go in the map room where Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill made strategic plans for the Second World War and to see the balcony where Truman sat was just an overwhelming experience for me. I was immersed in a sense of history and responsibility and I could say humility, that was surprising.

HUGH SIDEY

What former presidents did you admire most? Did you sort of a— a couple of heroes in the back of your mind like Jefferson or others? Lincoln, of course.

JIMMY CARTER

I would say in ancient times Thomas Jefferson was the one about whom I'd studied most and where I had the most respect and still do. But in modern times, in this century, I've always looked on Harry Truman as my hero. I've tried to emulate him on occasion. I've studied books about him, I knew what his speeches were and think he was a man of absolute honesty and integrity. I don't think he ever used the presidency for his own financial or other benefit. I think he was a man who looked upon his role in historic terms with great deal of flexibility, trying to use the talent that he had for the betterment of our country. And always I'm a great admirer of Truman.

HUGH SIDEY

In times of stress, crisis, would you go back to his writings and his actions?

JIMMY CARTER

Yes, I would. I would.

00:26:52:00

JIMMY CARTER

In fact, when I made speeches, as president on human rights, I would often quote Harry Truman who I look upon as an unrecognized champion of human rights. He made speeches very specifically on human rights that have now been forgotten

perhaps, and I think the most vivid demonstration of his commitment to human rights was his treatment of the Germans, and the Japanese and the Italians after the war. He didn't try to be punitive economically or otherwise, he tried to rebuild those societies and it's because of Harry Truman's human rights policy, in its most generic sense, that we now have wonderful democracies in Germany, in Italy and in Japan. It could have been the other way around. I think there was a great foundational stability for perpetuating the peace that we've seen since then.

HUGH SIDEY

You once along the way said that you would not knowingly tell a lie to the American people. Did you keep the pledge?

00:27:46:00

JIMMY CARTER

Yes, I did. I don't think anyone has ever alleged that I have...

HUGH SIDEY

No. I'm unaware of it at all, but it was a fairly bold thing to do, knowing that sometimes you have to obscure things...

JIMMY CARTER

Well, it was also a subject of great ridicule by the news reporters. And when I would get into a presidential press conference, which I love— which I did pretty often, there was always an attempt made by some of the news reporters to catch

me saying something different now from what I had said before. But no I never was.

HUGH SIDEY

You didn't subscribe to all those old sayings about the burden of the presidency and it's a white prison, it's a fish bowl. All of those things. You didn't seem to mind that?

JIMMY CARTER

No. Rosalyn would certify that I never lost an hour of sleep while I was president, worrying about what had happened or what might happen. I did the best I could and with my self confidence and my religious faith. I accommodated disappointments and really enjoyed being president. There was a time of great stress for me and that's while the hostages were being held, when I was obsessed with preserving their lives and bringing them back home safely. I would meet personally with the families of the hostages and try to reassure them of my interest. So, that was a very bad time.

HUGH SIDEY

That was your worst moment?

JIMMY CARTER

Oh, yes it was.

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HUGH SIDEY

What was the best?

00:29:32:00

JIMMY CARTER

Well, I think the best time was probably dealing with the Middle East issue.

HUGH SIDEY

Camp David?

JIMMY CARTER

Camp David and even better, I think, was the peace treaty that came along 6 months later. After Camp David the whole thing went downhill. The Israelis were very intransigent, particularly Begin more than the rest of his cabinet even, and the people of Israel. So, we reached a deadlock and I made a very difficult decision over the almost unanimous opposition of my cabinet and my staff to take the initiative and to go to Egypt and to go to Israel and to try and get Begin and Sadat to agree on a peace treaty. And I went over there and when they did sign, both of them signed the agreement. I guess that was probably my best moment.

HUGH SIDEY

What surprised you about the job?

00:30:24:00

JIMMY CARTER

The limitations on what a president can do. And I was pleased because the president's influence over foreign policy was about what I expected. The president's influence over legislation was less than what I expected, particularly as it relates to taxation where the Congress has a major force.

HUGH SIDEY

I remember that you wrote that you had a one week honeymoon with Congress.

JIMMY CARTER

That's about right. And then the thing that was most surprising was the minor role that the president plays in economics. You might say he has a half and half chance with Congress on shaping economic policy, but far beyond that it is the role of the federal reserve system and far beyond that is the totality of the American free enterprise system. So as far as the ups and downs of inflation and employment and so forth, the president is a minor player, but the president gets blamed when things go wrong for the economic situation and he takes unwarranted credit when things go well. So those are some of the surprises.

HUGH SIDEY

How'd you deal with criticism? Because every president gets bombarded.

00:31:45:00

JIMMY CARTER

Well I had a lot of criticism and we faced some of it before I was president. I remember when we arrived at the White House in what should have been a

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glorious reception you know I thought, the Washington Post had a full page spread of cartoons about me insinuating that I was— had an IQ of about 50. They had a picture of my mother barefooted with outhouses with moons cut in the door, straw coming out of my ears, and that was kind of a bad start, but we had learned to face that.

HUGH SIDEY

But did you look at it? Did you read it?

JIMMY CARTER

Yes, yes, I did. No, I read it.

HUGH SIDEY

You were aware of it.

JIMMY CARTER

I got up early every morning. By the time I got my first briefing I had read a complete report from Secretary of State to International Affairs, I had read all the way through the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, the New York Times. I was familiar with what was happening during the day and I never did avoid reading and absorbing that stuff.

HUGH SIDEY

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For other presidents, as you know, they would clip the papers so they wouldn't see some of it.

JIMMY CARTER

Well I read the whole thing, in fact I got up before the clippers.

HUGH SIDEY

Did you have enough time to really learn to be president or should there be a six year term?

00:33:11:00

JIMMY CARTER

I've talked to a number of former presidents, all of us agree that there should be one six year term. There's a consensus there. I think in many ways, I'm not trying to brag but I didn't really put reelection as a high priority. I addressed difficult issues the first term and my wife would say, "Jimmy, let's postpone that." But we stayed a matter of controversy because we were very ambitious those first four years. But I think that it would be better for the nation to have one six year term. I don't think that'll ever happen because it takes a lot of excitement and interest and a kind of crisis before you actually amend the constitution and nobody particularly cares if you have two full year term options or you have a 6 year term. But if you look back at recent history there have not been many presidents who serve two full terms. It's been a rare thing.

HUGH SIDEY

Let's broaden when you talked about the worst time and the best time a little.
What's your most important achievement and your greatest disappointment that you didn't get done?

00:34:25:00

JIMMY CARTER

That's hard to say because you don't know what the legacy might be. I think the implanting in the minds of the Americans and the rest of the world of the importance of basic human rights with a broad definition, may be the most important achievement. I also faced the crisis of normalizing diplomatic relations with China. Although President Nixon went to China, as you know, in 1972 and had the Shanghai Communique and said there was one China, he never was willing to say which one. So a lot of the folks that supported Taiwan assumed it was Taiwan and the others the other way. When President Ford was in office he ignored this China normalization completely and so did others, and I decided to normalize relations with China. The peace treaty between Israel and Egypt and the premises of Camp David have been good. And I think one of the lasting things would be the Alaska Lands Bill which doubled the size of our national park system and tripled the size of our wilderness areas and resolved a 20 year altercation that had begun when President Eisenhower was in office. So a few things came across...

HUGH SIDEY

What disappointed you, what do you feel you failed at? Or you wish that you'd had...

00:35:43:00

JIMMY CARTER

I wish that I could have made more progress in harmonizing relationships with the Soviet Union, and I think we could have because we had this SALT-II agreement, Brezhnev and I were fairly compatible after that. We were looking forward to a comprehensive test plan on nuclear explosives and then they invaded Afghanistan and this was a setback for the relationship between us and the Soviet Union because I was convinced, as was our security apparatus, in fact most leaders in the world, that the Soviets were preparing to go from Afghanistan, if they consolidated a hold on that country, into Pakistan and Iran. And Iran was torn apart with a war with Iraq. So we looked upon this Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as a very serious threat and I would say my greatest frustration was not having been able to bring more progress toward an end of the Cold War.

HUGH SIDEY

I see. Did the presidency change you?

00:36:48:00

JIMMY CARTER

I don't think so. I don't think it changed me much. It's hard for me to answer that, but the people who know me best—my wife and my close associates—I don't think it did.

HUGH SIDEY

Did you change the office?

JIMMY CARTER

Well, that's hard to say.

HUGH SIDEY

Leave a thumbprint of some kind?

JIMMY CARTER

Well there were a couple things. I think that the exaltation of the basic concept of human rights was something that I maybe implanted there that wouldn't have been as great. One thing that I changed was the role of the vice presidency and that's been very significant and permanent. Before I went to office, the vice president was a very secondary figure in America. People don't even remember how far removed the vice presidency was from the president. The most sensitive responsibility the president has is when to use nuclear weapons. Before, when I got there, I was shocked to realize that the vice president was not included in that process at all. And the vice president was not even informed about the characteristics or the proper use of nuclear weapons. If something happened to the president before I arrived there, the vice president was not even authorized or trained to take over. So I changed all of that and moved Fritz Mondale, my vice president, into the White House with me. He was never excluded from any of the most sensitive issues that I addressed. He was a full partner with me and this had never happened before. But subsequent to that, I think all of the presidents have emulated to some degree that basic change.

HUGH SIDEY

I was at a conference that discussed the vice presidency and you're given credit for having solved what everybody said was a problem of the vice presidency.

Let's move now. You leave the White House. You lose. You once said, "Show me a good loser and I'll show you a loser." A tough time?

00:38:58:00

JIMMY CARTER

It was a very difficult time and it would have been more difficult for me if it hadn't been even more difficult for Rosalynn. And as I try to think of arguments to assuage her anger and her grief, it gave me rationale for accommodating this unexpected involuntary...

HUGH SIDEY

But you moved rather quickly in your role as a peacemaker and the center here. Was that in your mind even before the election?

JIMMY CARTER

No, but it was in my mind between the election and when I left office because the thing that some people don't recognize is how young I was when I finished being president. I was one of the youngest surviving presidents in the century. I was only 56 years old, I had a lot of plans ahead of me for the second term that I anticipated, and I wanted to figure out in my own mind what could I do to utilize this tremendous remaining influence that I carry with me.

HUGH SIDEY

So there was no place in which you didn't know what you were going to do?

JIMMY CARTER

Not really. I have to say though that the breadth and scope of what the Carter Center does was totally unanticipated. I wanted to establish a place where I could help resolve disputes between nations or particularly within nations. I got to realize while I was president the enormity of conflicts in the world, and they were not being addressed because the United Nations was created nearly fifty years ago to address wars between nations and those have almost faded off the international scene. Now the wars are mostly inside countries and no one was really addressing them. And I saw in the very early stages of my involuntary retirement from the White House a real need for this and out of that has grown the Carter Center and all the work I've done since.

HUGH SIDEY

How soon did the hurt get relieved?

JIMMY CARTER

It took a while. While I was president I meticulously kept notes on a little handheld tape recorder. When something happened that I knew wouldn't be recorded officially--an impression of a visitor or a traumatic experience--I dictated my feelings about it. As I filled up the tape I just threw it into the out

basket. I never read all those notes, and when I left the White House I found out I had 6000 pages of diary notes and I was broke, I was a million dollars in debt I found out after I lost the election. Which I never had been before. I sold my memoirs and then I worked on them, and the memoirs came out of my re-assessment of my diary notes. So it gave me an agenda that let me heal my wounds, reassess the things that I had done and said and felt. I was in relative isolation in Plains because I had to get this book finished. So that was a good healing process. And the fact that I went back to Plains where my family and Rosa's family have been for 150 years, where our farm was and our church was, and our friends were--it was a haven within which I was able to heal my disappointment very quickly.

HUGH SIDEY

Looking back, what is the most important quality for a president? Can you— or one or two?

00:42:22:00

JIMMY CARTER

I think integrity. And the ability to communicate with the public. And... I think those two are the most important.

HUGH SIDEY

What now is in your life? Do you go on from here and continue the world peace mission?

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JIMMY CARTER

Yes. Well, we have voluminous programs now, of course, that are very exciting to me. We have an almost unlimited menu. For instance, we are concerned about starvation in Africa. In the last 7 years we have accumulated 300,000 African farmers who we are teaching how to grow more corn and wheat and millet. We immunize all the world's children by a task force that's always been located here at the Carter Center. We analyze all the world's conflicts and deal with them as best we can. We have a council of human rights activists here who try to prevent human rights abuses and correct them. So we have a full agenda here that's very exciting to us and unpredictable and adventurous and gratifying. So my own personal commitment of time is going to have to be reduced from year to year, but I've got now—I've built up a staff who do the administrative jobs and take on a lot of the responsibilities that I used to have on my own shoulders.

HUGH SIDEY

If you were able to write a list of priorities for a new president, what would you tell him to do in these times?

JIMMY CARTER

Well, we are now the only superpower in the world with the Soviet Union having faded into a relatively secondary position. I would like to see our nation exemplify all of the characteristics of a superpower. I'd like to see every person in the world look at the United States as a foremost proponent of peace so that every time there's a major dispute on Earth, the US would devote a major portion of its

great political and economic and even military strength to bring the disputing parties together, to use a maximum influence throughout the international community to bring peace to their country. This would exist in Burundi, and Rwanda, and Liberia and Sudan, just to name African countries. I'd like to see our country be the champion of basic human rights in a broad sense, so that people would turn to America for correction of human rights abuses and that we would not be guilty of human rights abuses ourselves.

00:45:06:00

JIMMY CARTER

I'd like for our country to be looked upon as a foremost proponent and protector of liberty, freedom and democracy. So every time there is an election held in the world in a troubled or transitional country the United States would be at the forefront of making sure that the election was fair and honest and trusted by both sides as a means to perpetuate what might be a fragile peace. I'd like to see our country be unselfish for a change. We're now the most selfish developed nation in the world. We give 3/10ths of our 1% of our gross national product to healing the wounds of people around the world. Whereas a country like Norway gives 20 times as much for the same purpose. So I would say peace and human rights and freedom and alleviation of suffering are the characteristics, in my opinion, of a great nation. And we don't exhibit those, and I think they would be a both politically attractive and inspirational and that they would accurately mirror the characteristics of the American people. That would be my advice to the next president.

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

HUGH SIDEY

What about the matter of domestically, family values and the whole social unit, the foundations of everything, faith, discipline.

00:46:21:00

JIMMY CARTER

I think the same thing would apply in our own country. But now the phrase “family values” is kind of a trick phrase. Most people when you say “family values” they think about ultraconservative religious values or the abuse of people or families that don't have both a mother and father to take care of the children, and the interrogation of those who are deprived or poor. But I think those kinds of values, I would say based on a judeo-christian ethic, need to be re-established in our country.

HUGH SIDEY

Is that something the government can do?

JIMMY CARTER

No, but I think the government can certainly address those kind of issues in a substantive way and not just as a political trick-way or catch phrase or soundbite in a political campaign and that's what has degenerated this entire concept.

END TC: 00:47:27