

President Jimmy Carter

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Alan Lowe, Executive Director of the American Museum of Science and Energy and the K-25 Atomic History Museum and who hosts the podcast American POTUS, writes about President Carter. Alan has been engaged over the years in the beginning of the Baker Center at the University of Tennessee (now known as The Howard H. Baker Jr. School of Public Policy and Public Affairs) and is past Director of three Presidential Libraries (Franklin D. Roosevelt, George W. Bush, and Abraham Lincoln). He has been with the AMSE Foundation since 2019.

Alan's knowledge of presidential history has been presented in Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning classes and serves well in leading the American POTUS podcast as well as AMSE Cast for the museum. In his term thus far as Executive Director here we have seen the AMSE and K-25 museums grow in service to our community and expand to include national and even international advisory committees.

So, enjoy insights into the life and experiences of President Jimmy Carter as perceived by our own presidential history expert, Alan Lowe:

As we mourn the passing of President Jimmy Carter, 100, on Dec. 29, 2024, his impact on our nation and the world are only now starting to be truly appreciated. His time in the White House was full of challenges and a fair share of missteps and failures, from hostages in Tehran, Iran, and the Soviet Union invasion of Afghanistan, to malaise, the energy crisis and stagflation on the domestic scene.

But historians like Kai Bird, Jonathan Alter and Jay Hakes have been taking a deeper look into the archives and applying fresh perspectives that only the passage of time permits. The result is a more balanced view of a presidency that did indeed have not only some failures but also successes as well, including historic accomplishments such as the Camp David Peace Accords, agreements that ended the decades-long state of war between Israel and Egypt.

That reappraisal is not uncommon for presidents, and I think richly deserved for President Carter. But as we know, much of the evaluation of his life now and later will be based on his remarkable post-presidency, a role that broke the old mold and created a new one for all Chief Executives.

From fighting disease in Africa (including almost eradicating guinea worm disease), overseeing elections around the globe, and helping mediate international disputes, to building houses for the less fortunate through the nonprofit Habitat for Humanity organization, teaching Sunday school, writing and speaking and traveling, Carter seemed to be moving non-stop even as he battled brain cancer later in his life.

He was recognized for his efforts with the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1999 and the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

I was fortunate to meet him on several occasions, but the encounter I remember most vividly occurred not long after I was made director of the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum in Dallas, Texas. The president and the First Lady, Rosalynn Carter, invited all presidential library directors to tour the recently renovated museum of the Carter Center in Atlanta. During what was an unforgettable morning, they led us on a tour of the exhibits, personally detailing their memories at each turn.

Afterwards we sat in a conference room where President Carter asked if we had any questions. For the first time in my experience, my director colleagues appeared to be tongue-tied. I must admit such silence is rare – presidential library directors are typically a very confident group.

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Finally, I piped up and asked him to tell us about his work in Africa and why he placed such an emphasis upon those efforts. His face lit up and for the next 20 minutes he gave us a detailed review of the challenges faced in Africa by tropical diseases such as the one caused by the parasitic guinea worm present in contaminated water and how the Carter Center was addressing them. (According to Harvard Public Health, only 13 cases of Guinea worm in humans were recorded in 2022, compared with 3.5 million cases 40 years ago).

Carter's passion for the subject was obvious, and his enthusiasm lit up the room. The other directors joined in, and we spoke with the president and Mrs. Carter for another hour. As I realized vividly that morning, Jimmy Carter's legacy will far outlive his four years in the White House and even his 100 years on this Earth. He was a good president and a great man.

Thank you, Alan, for a great review of not only President Jimmy Carter's accomplishments but your personal interactions with him and First Lady Rosalynn Carter. Such opportunities as you have had are rare for many. Your insights gained through your varied experiences well serve you in the role you are now engaged in here in Oak Ridge. We are proud of the work you are doing.

As the next chapters of the history of Oak Ridge evolve and the museums you direct continue to support all that is Oak Ridge history and accomplishments, the coming nuclear renaissance may well bring additional attention to us and the museums. Keep up the good work!



Former President Jimmy Carter with Alan Lowe at the Carter Center in Atlanta, 2009 (Courtesy of Alan Lowe)

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Former President Jimmy Carter and former First Lady Rosalynn Carter with National Archives representatives at the Carter Center in Atlanta, 2009, Alan Lowe is third from right (Courtesy of Alan Lowe)