

Jimmy Carter's Seventy-Year Career

CAREER SUMMARY

Jimmy Carter's early years provided the foundation for his working life. His father involved him in farmwork early, and Jimmy worked his way up the ladder as in any job. Young children had jobs such as hoeing, picking cotton, and shaking peanuts. Jimmy aspired to be allowed to plow, so his father gave him an internship of sorts, to prepare land in their large garden plot. By age 12, Jimmy was promoted to using two mules to break land in the field.

Academically, it was important to Jimmy and his parents that he go to college. "By the age of seven, Jimmy had made up his mind to go to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis."¹ He formed strong study habits in high school and graduated at age 16.

Admission to the U.S. Naval Academy required congressional sponsorship, but when Jimmy graduated from high school, his district's spot was already taken. As he waited for a future opportunity, Jimmy enrolled at nearby Georgia Southwestern College. His interest in teaching surfaced during that year, when he served as lab and teaching assistant to the science professor. Jimmy's political career was also foreshadowed during this period, when he ran for class president, lost, and instead became class vice president.

A year later, at age 17, Jimmy was admitted to the Naval Academy for the following fall. As part of his acceptance, he was invited to enroll at Georgia Tech as a general engineering student, to take prerequisite science courses and join naval ROTC. In the summer he was 18, Jimmy was sworn in as a cadet in Annapolis. Due to World War II, his class graduated in three years instead of four.

After graduation at age 21, Jimmy served seven years in the United States Navy, seeking out opportunities for advancement in his chosen career path. All of his assignments were excellent learning experiences, from his first tour on a surface ship to his next, more sought-after duty as a submarine officer. His strong interest in technology and studious nature earned him a post as a pre-commissioned nuclear submarine officer at the age of 28.

During his early twenties he also met and married Rosalynn, and their three sons were born while Jimmy was in the Navy.

When he was 28, Jimmy found himself at a major crossroads in his family and career paths. When his father passed away after a short battle with cancer, Jimmy faced a critical decision: continue his successful career in the Navy, or return to small-town Georgia and take over the family business?

Shortly after his 29th birthday, Jimmy received an honorable discharge from the Navy, and he returned to rural life. His father had been an important member of the economic and civic community, and it wasn't long before Jimmy occupied many of the same roles. First, he took over management of his father's seed and fertilizer warehouse business, as well as the family's farmlands and timberlands. Over the course of his 30s, he was appointed to many of the same posts as his father: community development committee, county library board, hospital authority, chairman of the school board, and leadership positions within the local Lion's Club.

¹ Peter Bourne, *Jimmy Carter* (New York: Scribner Book Company, 1997), 44

By the time he was 38, Jimmy began his foray into electoral politics. He served two terms as a state senator. When he was 41, he considered a run for a congressional seat but instead ran for governor. Upon losing the first bid, Jimmy continued his business activities in Plains while making plans for another run for governor. At age 46, Jimmy won and was sworn in as governor of Georgia, a position limited to one four-year term. While his policy focus was primarily internal to the state of Georgia, the role provided Jimmy his first opportunities to gain national political exposure and international affairs experience.

In 1972, when Jimmy was 48 and midway through his gubernatorial term, he determined that he would run for president in 1976. Though he might be considered “between jobs” 1975 to 1976, the family business in Plains continued to occupy his attention. In reality, his full-time work was national politics and ultimately a successful presidential campaign.

Jimmy Carter was sworn in as President of the United States in January 1977 at age 52. His presidency is most remembered for significant international events. Accomplishments that have been most celebrated are the historic Camp David Accords, the Panama Canal Treaty, and the SALT II nuclear arms treaty. Less positive for Jimmy was the Iran hostage crisis leading into the 1980 election season during the final year of his term. The crisis was perhaps the decisive factor causing Jimmy’s re-election loss in 1980.

At age 56, Jimmy was forced to leave a job he loved and had hoped to continue. He and Rosalynn returned to Georgia, and took a very short sabbatical to attend to family matters and consider career next steps.

Upon assessing his strengths and passions, Jimmy set out on three parallel career tracks for his “second chapter”. First, having previously written two books as part of his run for the presidency, he determined that being an author would be a good source of income as well as something he would enjoy. (Surely being pursued by multiple publishers for the rights to his memoir was added encouragement.) Second, drawing on previous experiences with teaching, learning, and academia, he formed a relationship with Emory University to become a “distinguished professor”, allowing him the opportunity to interact with students while not obligating him to the usual faculty responsibilities of research papers and semester-long classes. Finally, understanding the expectation of a former president to establish a presidential library, Jimmy conceived of something larger and more active: The Carter Center.

From his late 50s on, Jimmy became busier than ever with his three careers. He is also known as famously dedicated volunteer as a Bible study teacher at his local church and as a build leader with Habitat for Humanity.

Most visible over four decades has been Jimmy’s work with The Carter Center, mediating conflict and monitoring elections. He won the Nobel Prize at age 78 for his cumulative achievements on behalf of peace, democracy, and human rights. Five years later, he worked with Nelson Mandela to become a founding member of The Elders, “an independent group of global leaders working for peace, justice, human rights and a sustainable planet”², in which he was active until the age of 92.

Jimmy published approximately one book per year from the early 1990s until the 2020 pandemic. When Jimmy released *A Full Life: Reflections at Ninety*, his professional and volunteer commitments were still

² “Who we are.” *The Elders*, <https://theelders.org/who-we-are>

going strong with no sign of stopping. His subsequent successful battle with cancer at age 91 did little to slow his activities. It took a global pandemic for 95-year-old Jimmy to hand off some of his duties. When Emory University's student life resumed, Jimmy's annual town hall meetings with students featured an important public figure of his choosing, rather than Jimmy himself. He retired from his volunteer Sunday School teacher position at his church, and arranged for the Habitat for Humanity's 2023 Carter Work Project to be hosted by other public figures. However, it was not until he chose to enter hospice at age 98 that he could truly be considered a retiree.

LESSONS FOR A SEVENTY-YEAR CAREER

What can we learn from Jimmy's extensive career?

Socio-Political Context

The social structure of the American South of the 1920s and 1930s was mere steps away from the pre-Civil War era of plantations and slave ownership. Structural racism continued to dominate society and the economy. As a White landowner, Jimmy's father enjoyed a high social status – earning him seats on the local library board, school board, and hospital authority. By the time of Jimmy's childhood, those who labored on his father's 360-acre farm in rural Georgia were mostly Black, salaried tenants. The Carter family, particularly Jimmy's mother, had a reputation for being kinder and friendlier to their Black neighbors and employees than was perhaps considered appropriate in "polite" (i.e., White) society – behavior that could lead to business boycotts or lost elections.

The Civil Rights Movement was well underway when Jimmy joined the political realm. Throughout his political career, Jimmy positioned himself in opposition to proud segregationists. Though risky for a White Southerner, he generally was transparent in his support of the rights of Black Americans. By the time he ran for president, Jimmy's credentials as a Southerner were an asset for the Democratic party seeking to attract voters across the nation who supported civil rights while retaining some voters in the slowly-evolving South.

When the Carters began their post-presidential second career in the 1980s, few were attentive to the demographic shifts in longevity and society's need to consider a later retirement age. The Carters were conscious pioneers of the "encore career", despite uncertainty of their own longevity.

Education and Early Career

Jimmy's educational path and career entry were fairly typical. Like Jimmy, it is not uncommon that high school graduates don't immediately enter a four-year degree program. For two years, Jimmy completed prerequisites at Georgia Southwestern College and Georgia Tech to prepare him for entry into his undergraduate program at the U.S. Naval Academy.

Jimmy's selection of school created a direct path to employment, and so it was that he could remain with his employer (the U.S. Navy) through his 20s, gaining seven years of progressive experience after graduation. Although Jimmy experienced early-career disappointments, such as not being admitted into the Rhodes Scholar program, he also had notable successes in his 20s. When he was 23, he graduated third among the 52 members of his submarine officer training course. At age 27, he was selected to be a commanding officer within the Navy's new nuclear program.

Relationships

Family has played a significant role in Jimmy's career. Most notably, the death of Jimmy's father marked a career pivot point, leading to the decision to leave the Navy and take over the family business.

Having the right life partner is often cited as a major career success factor. The marriage of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter is an exemplar. As with many relationships, some evolution was needed for their marriage to become a true partnership. Each occupied more traditional gender roles during their early, child-rearing phase. However, running a family business gave Jimmy opportunities to appreciate Rosalynn's professional skills. It was during his time as an elected official that Jimmy came to see Rosalynn as a true partner in his campaigns and governing. In the second half of life, they struck a balance, collaborating on certain projects while maintaining individual pursuits.

Money

The Carters' financial situation varied quite a bit during different phases of Jimmy's career. During his times of public service – military service in his early 20s; governorship and presidency during his 40s and 50s – their basic needs were met, but there was little opportunity for saving. The Carters' first home in Plains after leaving the Navy was in public housing.

Jimmy's entrepreneurial career phases were characterized by greater prosperity. When Jimmy took over his father's business, he had to navigate challenging conditions with careful business decisions, but the business was thriving by the time he turned his attention to elected office. Post-presidency, Jimmy's prolific work as an author has been a primary source of reliable income for his family.

Losing a Job

At age 56, Jimmy's career trajectory in electoral politics was cut short by the 1980 determination of the voters that he should not keep his job.

Involuntarily leaving a job is a significant career moment. Like many, Jimmy was forced to grapple with complex emotional issues (professional identity) and practical issues (how to make a living).

For Jimmy, it was an opportunity to assess his options in a way that was similar to earlier career decision-points, but more open-ended. He took time to assess his skills, experience, passions, and goals. He used his network to obtain advice and connections for his next steps, which set him on a four-decade-long path.

Proactive vs. Reactive Career Opportunities

Jimmy's career, like many, was a mix of proactive planning ("I want that job, and I'm going to work until I get it") and reactive opportunism ("I have to seize this moment").

Jimmy's early career was conventionally proactive. He had set his sights on the Navy early in life, and had to be tenacious to attain the goal as roadblocks came along.

In contrast, becoming a business owner in rural Georgia was decidedly reactive. Jimmy didn't set out to become a local agribusiness leader, but chose to accept the role upon his father's passing. Many of the business decisions he had to make during this time were in reaction to factors outside of his control, such as drought and economic conditions.

Jimmy's career as an elected official was a mix of planning and opportunism. In accepting his father's place in the community, he took on various public service appointments, which led to him being a natural candidate for the state senate. His intended next move was to run for U.S. Congress, but circumstances led to him running for governor instead. Although he lost that election, it was the turning

point for more proactive political planning: he laid the groundwork for his next, successful, run for governor – which created the conditions for his run for president.

Finally, Jimmy’s entry into his post-presidency phase is undeniably reactive. However, he quickly shifted into making proactive and thoughtful choices about how best to use his time and talents during the remaining years of his working life – which turned out to be decades.

Alternate Paths to a Goal

There are numerous examples in Jimmy’s career when his goal wasn’t achieved directly or immediately. He didn’t give up – with patience and tenacity, he found a different way to get there.

A simple example is his entrance into the Naval Academy. When Jimmy graduated high school, the one spot available that year was already taken. The dream delayed, for two years he engaged in various activities to prepare himself for the opportunity. Ultimately this was to his benefit: he was older and presumably fitter, and had two years of post-secondary experience that helped him to be academically successful.

More nuanced is Jimmy’s path to engagement in international affairs – not a typical arena for someone from rural Georgia. His early interest in the global arena is evidenced by his application to the Rhodes Scholar program at age 23. “It was the first time in his life that Jimmy was forced to face a significant failure.”³ It was quite a bit later, during his state-level public service, that he was nominated to a 60-member international commission. That setting facilitated his intimate relationships with career diplomats, providing Jimmy with an education perhaps more valuable than a postgraduate degree. As a result, both Jimmy’s presidency and post-presidential career are primarily known for success on the international stage.

Project-Based Career

Careers are often described as a “ladder”. In Jimmy’s case, his early career within the Navy certainly fits the typical “career ladder” model.

After that, as with many careers, Jimmy’s path no longer fits that metaphor. As a business owner, author, professor, and co-founder/leader of the Carter Center – and even as an elected official – his career is perhaps better described in terms of projects.

In a project-based career, success is not found in climbing a defined ladder. Instead, satisfaction is derived from setting and achieving defined goals. Even Jimmy’s “climb” from state senator to governor to president can be seen through this lens.

A successful business owner, already at the top of the enterprise, sets certain goals for the business to thrive. One example in Jimmy’s career is his decision to grow his own seed instead of buying and reselling certified seed, leading to a major expansion of the business.

Jimmy’s four-decade post-presidential career has been very project-based. With the Carter Center, he planned conferences focused on selected topics or undertook consultancies to address urgent global situations. Meanwhile, each of his 30 books was a significant project.

³ Peter Bourne, *Jimmy Carter* (New York: Scribner Book Company, 1997), 64

Jimmy himself uses a topical approach to describe his work. In his book, *A Full Life: Reflections at Ninety*⁴, he devotes one chapter to “Issues Mostly Resolved” and a second chapter of uncompleted projects called “Problems Still Pending”.

Technology

With his science and engineering background, it’s no surprise that Jimmy embraced cutting edge technologies in each phase of his career. While in the Navy, rather than settling for tours on surface ships, Jimmy sought out projects that allowed him to shape the implementation of brand-new submarine technology. Later, Jimmy’s fascination with clean technology and commitment to environmental stewardship made him the first president to put solar panels on the White House.

A key purchase when Jimmy launched into his post-presidential writing career in 1981 was a word processor – an expensive and advanced technology at the time.

On a broader scale, the Carter Center has pioneered the use of practical technology to support democracy internationally. For example, the Center has developed specialized election monitoring software for easy use in the field.

Framing Longevity

At age 62, six years after leaving the White House, Jimmy co-wrote a book with his wife Rosalynn titled *Everything to Gain: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life*. The Carters had recently faced “forced retirement”, and the book was published in 1987 at a time when the expected retirement age was 65. The book reveals the Carters grappling in real-time with vital questions: How much time do we have left? How do we plan, knowing that our time may be short or it may be long?

Jimmy committed himself to staying busy with work, volunteerism, family, and personal pursuits – rather than accepting a sedentary retirement lifestyle in his late 50s or early 60s. In a society where the question is frequently posed, “Aren’t they too old for that?”, Jimmy demonstrated repeatedly that experience is valuable to the world, and vitality is possible well into one’s 90s. Indeed, the founding of The Elders made a statement: the world benefits from the wisdom that comes with age and the global respect that comes with a lifetime of accomplishments.

⁴ Jimmy Carter, *A Full Life: Reflections at Ninety* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015)