

The Future Almost Arrived: Why and How Jimmy Carter Failed to Change  
U.S. Foreign Policy. A Book Prospectus.  
By Itai Nartzizenfeld Sneh

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## ***BOOK PROSPECTUS***

### **Working Title: *The Future Almost Arrived: Why and How Jimmy Carter Failed to Change U.S. Foreign Policy***

By Itai Nartzizenfield Sneh<sup>1</sup>

#### Description:

This book is a study of U.S. foreign policy in the first two years of Jimmy Carter's administration and focuses on the extent to which the promotion and protection of human rights drove actions abroad. A perennial problem for the United States is to find and articulate ideals and values that reconcile American commercial and strategic interests with the well-being of other nations and their citizens as well as with the moral values of the U.S. itself. I illuminate the complex formation of American diplomacy through the inner-workings of the early Carter administration.

Since 9/11, U.S. foreign policy is in a severe crisis. Understanding grievances common abroad, abused by terrorists for nefarious purposes, is crucial for building stronger, more equitable practices. The United States could have spearheaded an enlightened global agenda for the benefit of oppressed individuals and groups rather than continue to perpetuate a gap between moral rhetoric and self-serving deeds. Consistently upholding genuine human rights and advocating a human rights agenda may have dispelled distrust in American motives and legitimized its actions, preventing resentment and attracting more allies.

Scholarly appreciation for Carter and his legacy has grown considerably since he left office. The early "traditional" view, argued by scholars such as Joshua Muravchick, deemed Carter's conduct a failure, but, partially because of a lack of access to documents, undervalued his potential while overestimating his ethical motives and his dedication for reforming U.S. foreign policy to advocate for a universal application of human rights standards. Recently, scholars such as David F. Schmitz and Vanessa Walker portrayed Carter as a realist who cautiously advanced human rights given the limits of U.S. power.

Currently, the prevailing "revisionist" outlook is that Carter prophetically and genuinely placed the promotion and protection of human rights at the core of American foreign policy. According to this view, his deep convictions -- derived from religious beliefs, expressed through concerns for morality, justice and dignity worldwide -- received little support from the public, from Congress, and even from his own staff, because these groups were steeped in conventional thinking, yet recent history has redeemed Carter's legacy.

My thesis is that the "revisionist" view, argued by scholars such as Douglas Brinkley, Peter G. Bourne and Robert A. Strong, misread, almost mythologized, the Carter

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor of History, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

administration's approach and capacity. Carter did not overhaul U.S. foreign policy by translating ambitious words and promising ideals into a reformed conduct. While his administration adopted human rights as a tenet for foreign policy, Carter failed to design imaginative guidelines or prescribe new practices. He also did not exhibit adequate authority and originality in recruiting senior staff that would have supported an innovative agenda.

Attempts to rehabilitate Carter's values, agenda and actions serve contemporary purposes. One is the critique of subsequent presidents and their administrations. Another is to highlight Carter's post-presidential work, especially humanitarian relief, mediation, and development projects. Decades later, the growing universal stature of human rights, and efforts for conflict resolution by international actors, helps putting his earlier deeds in a better stead.

Contents:

Carter's knowledge and practice of international relations served only U.S. interests. His hubris of wielding American power to advance the cause of human rights ultimately blended the worst of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal pragmatism with the defeat of Woodrow Wilson's idealism. Carter compromised his principles and focused on prevailing conditions rather than on how he could make America stronger and more just. The lessons that we can draw from Carter's initial promises and his actual record are instructive for today.

Carter won office because of a moral and strategic crisis in the 1970s. Public trust in the foreign policy/national security establishment, and in the authority of the presidency, declined precipitously due to the defeat in the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal and revelations of clandestine and illegal violent American operations abroad. The *realpolitik* of Kissinger and Nixon thus lost much of its legitimacy as a useful framework for U.S. actions abroad, but there was no reform in foreign policy during the Carter administration.

Carter squandered a unique opportunity to effect institutional transformation by working with activists and with Congress to integrate human rights into bilateral and multilateral relations. Human rights remained primarily a rhetoric that was not integrated into American foreign policy. Decision-makers were not genuinely committed to changing their guiding principles, to a sufficient buildup of global alliances, or to a utilization of international organizations to secure a transformation of policy. I seek to answer in this study what obstacles caused the non realization of moral, national and universal commitments.

Carter neither seriously contemplated nor struggled to execute a radical agenda; he was pragmatic rather than visionary even in his administration's formative years, 1976-7. Carter did not revolutionize the conduct of foreign policy to focus on the rights of people rather than on relations with states. Instead, he largely conformed to the Cold War mentality of combating the Soviet Union by supporting pro-American oppressive regimes.

Carter won domestic legitimacy and a narrow victory in 1976 because his repeated promise to reorganize government and provide moral guidance addressed the crisis of confidence in the presidency. Historians regularly underestimate the scope and consequences of Carter's missed opportunity for an upheaval in the priorities in American diplomacy when becoming president. This misreading may be explained by the lack of correspondence between his sincere beliefs and reality.

Aspiring to provide moral leadership during his campaign, Carter vowed to make American participation in international relations productive for economically needy and politically powerless people in the world. But Carter was better at highlighting wrongs than at providing a concrete and coherent plan. He articulated few outcomes and did not specify which needs he would remedy and in which countries. Carter had no operational formula to interpret policies in a manner that would persuade Americans that advancing human rights was in their own best interest. This shortcoming led to inconsistencies and shifts of focus. Meaningful recasting of traditional American priorities in the practice of foreign policy was difficult without a deep commitment and a clear plan.

The problem lay primarily in the existing system of decision-making in U.S. foreign policy which Carter could have been re-engineered. His administration relied heavily on pre-existing policies and bureaucratic structures. These professionals viewed diplomacy as embedded in a calculus of relative power, confined to adversarial negotiations between governing elites in sovereign states. According to this outlook international relations were competitive. Their goal was to maximize commercial and strategic national interests not to address religious, ethnic and ideological conflicts. Foreign policy was not the domain for advocacy for collaborative advancement of human rights, nor for the pursuit of concerns for the well-being of citizens of other societies.

A micro-manager, Carter was determined to demonstrate leadership. Ironically, he delegated a large degree of the formation and execution of foreign policy goals. He had unrealistic expectations of a staff derived primarily from the ranks of the foreign policy/national security establishment insiders, and cared little about the crucial details. Carter may have wanted to change the future, but his methods were steeped in past conduct. He lacked political credibility and communication skills to change how ordinary Americans, legislators and experts approached international affairs.

The Vice President, Walter Mondale, and the Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, had little access to Carter. Patricia Derian, Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs, a civil rights activist whom Carter brought from Mississippi, had little influence. By contrast, National Security Adviser, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, whom Carter met and befriended at the Trilateral Commission in the early 1970s, enjoyed full access and trust. He had a central role in formulating and implementing a traditional foreign policy.

Brzezinski, a *realpolitik* tactician, favored human rights in the formulation of foreign affairs policy primarily as a sword to wield against the Communist bloc. By articulating

strategic concerns for stability amid threats from the Soviets, Brzezinski undermined Carter's commitment to modify the foundations of America's foreign policy from the first days of the administration, in 1976-7. Brzezinski's influence thus preceded shifts to the SALT II agreement with the Soviet Union, signing and ratifying the Panama Canal Treaties, negotiating peace in the Middle East and formalizing relations with the People's Republic of China.

My analysis consists of examining Carter's speeches, and multiple internal policy papers, especially "Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-28: Human Rights," July 8, 1977, NLC-1002-A-246-1, whose chief author was Warren Christopher, the Deputy Secretary of State in charge of the "Christopher Group." This Inter-Agency committee considered every facet of American foreign policy for integrating principles of human rights with all relevant actions, including the conduct of diplomacy, commercial transactions, the distribution of aid, and strategic cooperation. The problem, however, was that strategic or ideological reasons justified limiting actions on *each* and *every* country or issue.

The writers of this binding document meant to launch a fundamental reform but diluted the scope and the strength of human rights. The "Christopher Group" did not fully support even the basic norms of civil liberties, and economic, social and cultural rights. Such standards were explicitly proclaimed by the United Nations in universally-binding conventions. The Carter administration excluded the more legally controversial solidarity rights that endorsed the duty of rich countries to provide aid.

To provide a deeper understanding of Carter's human rights doctrine, I explore his formative experience in Georgia, under-analyzed by others. He seldom voiced public demands for equal status for African-Americans. Carter often supported segregation until he became the governor in 1971. His speedy conversion to the cause of civil rights, in contrast to his original views, appears hypocritical, and an expedient launching pad for a national career.

Carter linked the agenda of human rights to credibility abroad. He contended that, for its own benefit, the United States should cooperate with countries whose political, social and economic agendas and conduct were meritorious and America must simultaneously cease to help governing elites that oppressed their own citizens and were U.S. allies. The reasoning was twofold: violating human rights was wrong, and such actions failed to serve immediate or long-term American interests. Carter intended to secure decency in foreign policy. This combination of moral judgment and utilitarian logic positioned Carter closer to *idealpolitik* than to *realpolitik*.

*Idealpolitik* that focused on human rights as the "soul" of U.S. foreign policy did not become operational because choices for change were limited. Alleged needs to support strategic allies subordinated the formation and the consistent implementation of a human rights paradigm. Carter continued to support oppressive regimes in countries such as Iran, Turkey, South Korea and Indonesia because they were pro-American. Calls for meaningful changes faced concerns for stability emanating from the Cold War, and pressures from ideological, business and military lobbies within the United States. The

U.S. imposed sanctions against Latin American countries such as Argentina, Chile and Uruguay by restricting the sale of arms or suspending economic assistance. This modicum of punishment was partial and often ineffective. Even South Africa did not suffer sanctions for its blatant discrimination of blacks. Carter, however, did make a normative contribution to the emerging campaign against *apartheid* as the first U.S. President to publicly denounce this racist system.

Carter lacked genuine faith in advocating human rights as a leading element in foreign policy. He allowed his administration to reject a comprehensive definition of human rights espoused by international law, other Western countries, and non-governmental organizations. Carter curtailed his own human rights agenda in several ways, as a variety of documents demonstrate, precluding a meaningful change in U.S. foreign policy.

There was not enough dialogue with, and input by, members of Congress, and even his own staff officer, Patricia Derian. Similarly, there was little contact with progressive elements abroad, such as human rights advocacy groups in pro-American countries. Strategic and commercial interests dominated policy-making. Carter rarely preferred multilateral solutions over unilateral actions, with the notable exception of the Panama Canal treaties. This book in sum, analyzes why and how Carter's words did not become operational already in the first months of his mandate, and what current lessons may be deduced from this pioneering experience.

Target Audience:

There is a broad and general reading public interested in American history and presidential studies, U.S. foreign policy and human rights in particular.

My book is relevant to the fields of American politics, presidential biographies, U.S. foreign policy, human rights, political science, international relations, and, of course, general American history. The general public, undergraduates, graduate students and scholars will gain insights into political processes, the formation of foreign policy, the importance of human rights, and the constraints on the executive branch in making foreign policy.

Courses in which this book might be used as a text or as a supplementary text include International Relations, U.S. Politics, 20<sup>th</sup> Century US History, American Studies, US History since 1945, History of US Foreign Policy, Soviet-American Relations, History of Human Rights, American Presidency, the 1970s, History of the Cold War.

Outline:

The book will be approximately 280 pages.

In Chapter 1, I provide the political, legal and diplomatic context of the Carter Presidency. This background includes definitions of human rights and the history of U.S. foreign policy before 1977.

Afterwards, I closely analyze the contents of multiple primary documents. These include speeches that Carter -- as a contender and as a president -- delivered publicly, which elaborated his vision on the role of human rights in American foreign policy, and position papers the Carter administration produced on how to promote and protect human rights in the routine conduct of foreign policy.

In Chapter 2, I explore the private dimension and the public expressions of Carter's convictions before his administration formed its policy on human rights.

In Chapter 3, I investigate the contents of speeches, policy papers and directives deliberated and proclaimed during the formative period, 1976-7.

In chapter 4, I analyze the "Presidential Review Memorandum/NSC-28: Human Rights" issued in July, 1977 by the "Christopher Group."

In chapter 5, I focus on the role of the national Security Adviser, Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, and his struggle against more progressive activists.

Finally, in the Epilogue, I expand on the broad, long-term implications of my findings.

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