The Other J.C.

Jimmy Carter
Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid
Simon & Schuster, 2006,
264 pages.

Reviewed by Steven F. Hayward

Right in the first sentence of Jimmy Carter's new book on the Middle East there is a seemingly throwaway phrase whose significance is easily missed en route to the web of distortions that follows: "One of the major goals of my life," Carter begins, "while in political office and since I *was retired from the White House by the 1980 election…*" (emphasis added). Now, it is understandable that an ex-president would seek to couch his electoral humiliation in the least wounding terms, but is it really so hard to say, "since I lost the 1980 election"?

That Jimmy Carter—man of action, seeker of solutions, prophet of peace—would describe his electoral drubbing in the passive voice points to a persistent intellectual and character trait that has been evident throughout his long career: The presumption of his own self-evident superiority. This trait has led him to think that he could not possibly have been to blame when voters rejected him in favor of a B-movie actor. As *Time* magazine essayist Lance Morrow once wrote, Carter behaves "as

if the election of 1980 had been only some kind of ghastly mistake, a technicality of democratic punctilio."

This presumption perhaps explains why Carter, in *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, can go from outrage to outrage and never feel compelled to answer arguments or acknowledge gross errors of judgment or fact. This is not a new facet of Carter's character. One his earliest biographers, Betty Glad, noted that as governor of Georgia in the early 1970s, he "seemed to experience opposition as a personal affront and as a consequence responded to it with attacks on the integrity of those who blocked his projects. He showed a tendency to equate his political goals with the just and the right and to view his opponents as representative of some selfish or immoral interest."

Indeed, Carter has been able to get away with this for so long that he probably thought his immunity to criticism was unassailable. But with his latest book, he has finally gone too far. He willfully distorts facts; he misrepresents the terms and conditions of treaties, United Nations resolutions, and diplomatic events; he traffics in dodgy anti-Semitic euphemisms. The book comes without any footnotes or source references, and Carter has never refuted the charge that he plagiarized maps that former President Clinton's Middle East negotiator Dennis Ross developed for his own book on the Middle East. *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* cannot be taken seriously as a commentary on the Middle East—and it has not been. But it is not useless. Properly understood, it reveals the tendentious and hostile mind of a man who has worked like few others to convince the world that he is a foremost repository of the very opposite traits: Objectivity and compassion.

It is Carter's presumption of his own great wisdom and judgment that has apparently led him to believe that the normal conventions of discretion that all ex-presidents have hitherto observed do not apply to him. He seems to suffer from Stockholm Syndrome when it comes to odious dictators who hate America—Carter admires, and has hugged, almost every one of them. Hence he has globe trotted as a de facto shadow secretary of state, breaking bread with Hafez al-Assad, Fidel Castro, North Korea's Kim Il Sung (the last Stalinist, whom Carter inexplicably said North Koreans regarded "as almost a deity, as a George Washington, as a Patrick Henry, as a worshipful leader all rolled into one"), and, above all, Yasser Arafat. "There was no world leader Jimmy Carter was more eager to know than Yasser Arafat," Carter biographer

Douglas Brinkley wrote. At their first meeting in Paris in 1990, they prayed and cried together, according to one account.

It has always been an interesting question whether Carter's credulity toward Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) can be explained by simple gullibility, or something more sinister. In *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* Carter repeats verbatim from his prior Middle East book, *The Blood of Abraham,* a description of the PLO as a sort of Palestinian version of the United Way: "The PLO is a loosely associated umbrella organization bound together by common purpose, but it comprises many groups eager to use diverse means to reach their goals." As for Arafat, Carter depicts him as a beneficent statesman and humanitarian: "As chairman [of the PLO], Arafat turned much of his attention to raising funds for the care and support of the refugees and inspiring worldwide contributions to their cause." Carter also accepts, with stunning implausibility, Arafat's statement that "The PLO has never advocated the annihilation of Israel," instead endorsing his claim that "Zionist disinformation" and "differences among voices coming from the PLO" in truth perpetuate the idea of Palestinian hostility. (Carter even tries to absolve the other "voices" of their Israel-hatred, claiming in one recent interview that Hamas isn't committed to Israel's destruction.) Of course, it is tiresome to cite the nearly countless times Arafat declared the PLO's unambiguous intent to destroy Israel. Two examples will here suffice: "The goal of our struggle is the end of Israel, and there can be no compromise," Arafat was quoted in the *Washington Post* in 1970. A decade later he told a Venezuelan newspaper that "Peace for us means the destruction of Israel. We are preparing for an all-out war, a war which will last for generations."

The fallout from *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* has been volcanic, with widespread editorial-page denunciations and highly publicized rebukes from advisers of his own Carter Center at Emory University. The *Washington Post Book Review* called the book "cynical," while columnist Michael Kinsley called it "moronic." Fourteen members of the Board of Councilors at the Carter Center wrote an open letter deploring Carter's "false claims" and "malicious advocacy." The most substantial blow, however, came from Kenneth Stein, a distinguished figure in the field of Middle Eastern studies at Emory who had long collaborated with Carter on Middle Eastern issues and served as director of the Carter Center. In his letter of resignation from his affiliation with the center, Stein wrote: "Being a former president does not give one a unique privilege

to invent information or to unpack it with cuts, deftly slanted to provide a particular outlook." Of course, Carter can't say Stein never warned him. In the early 1990s, Stein wrote to Carter of his growing concern about Carter's pro-Arabism: "If you continue on the course of only criticizing or minimizing Israel in your public presentations, you will be doing yourself a potentially devastating disservice, particularly if you want to be re-engaged in any capacity in future Middle East diplomacy." To this advice, Carter obviously paid no heed.

One of Stein's most damning charges against Carter's new book concerns the untruthful revision of the content of one of his exchanges with Syria's Hafez al-Assad in 1990. Stein is in a good position to know: He was Carter's note-taker at the meeting, and gave Carter a full set of his notes. In *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid,* Carter says that Assad indicated his willingness to negotiate with Israel for the return of the Golan Heights, as well as to make the Golan a demilitarized zone. But Stein's notes unambiguously indicate that Assad rejected demilitarization as a violation of Syria's sovereignty. Stein writes: "These are intentional changes that Carter made for the apparent purpose of misrepresenting Israeli intransigence and Arab state flexibility."

To these and other charges, Carter has reacted as though he, in fact, is the wounded party. He has lashed out at critics for being under the sway of the "Jewish lobby," and, incredibly, denied that anyone has found any errors in his book. He says he wants to engage in debate and dialogue, but at the same time ducks every invitation to discuss the issues with informed interlocutors. His only concession so far has been to apologize for the most egregious formula of the entire book—his blatant endorsement of Palestinian terrorism. "It is imperative that the general Arab community and all significant Palestinian groups," he writes, "make it clear that they will end the suicide bombings and other acts of terrorism *when international laws and the ultimate goals of the Roadmap for Peace are accepted by Israel.*" (Emphasis added.) Carter is clearly saying that Palestinians need not give up terror until they achieve their political goals. At Brandeis University (where he agreed only to answer pre-screened questions), Carter said the phrase had been poorly and wrongly worded.

Is this explanation credible? Carter has a long habit of engaging in what was once described as "blurt and retreat," whereby he backs away from egregious statements when called on them. Yet circumstantial evidence suggests that this language was not

mere verbal sloppiness, as Carter now wishes us to think. At the end of one of Carter's freelance Middle East peace conferences a few years ago, he let slip a comment that ranks up there with many racially tinged remarks from his various Georgia political campaigns: "Had I been elected to a second term, with the prestige and authority and influence and reputation I had in the region, we could have moved to a final solution." It is strange that an experienced politician would use that particular expression. Carter's secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, incautiously wrote years after leaving office that Carter's Middle East plan in a prospective second term was simple: Sell out Israel.

In another instance of "blurt and retreat," Carter has said he didn't mean to use the term "apartheid" in its South African, racial sense. But in the book, Carter says the Israelis are "imposing a system of partial withdrawal, encapsulation, and apartheid on the Muslim and Christian citizens of the occupied territories." He has also compared Israel's security fence to the Berlin Wall, glossing over the fact that the latter was intended to fence people in, while Israel's wall is intended to keep murderers out. The fence is necessary precisely because of the Palestinian intransigence that rejected the Clinton-brokered offer to settle once and for all the borders of the West Bank on terms advantageous to the Palestinians. Carter contradicts both Clinton and Dennis Ross (who were, after all, in the room where the negotiations took place) in accepting Arafat's revisionist view of the terms of the deal, writing, "There was no possibility that any Palestinian leader could accept such terms and survive." Ironically, Carter is in a sense correct: Having nurtured the hatred of Israel for two generations, no Palestinian leader could make a serious peace deal with Israel, no matter the terms, without incurring the wrath of Palestinian militants. But this is Israel's fault?

Any number of character flaws may explain Carter's behavior and his statements. He may also suffer from living in the shadow of former President Ronald Reagan. Carter always thought Reagan an unworthy successor to him in the White House, and it must wound his pride to hear Reagan now lauded as the "great liberator" who set the stage for the peaceful end of the Cold War. Throughout his life, Carter's competitive streak has consistently led him to try to "one-up" the fellow next to him; the only possible way for Carter to match Reagan's achievement was thus to build on his one and only foreign policy success, the Camp David accords of 1978. Only the Middle East ranks close to the Cold War on

the scale of world-historical conflicts that defy solution. Hence *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, his last attempt to play grand-scale peacemaker in the twenty-first century.

Even if Carter were not so obviously unbalanced in his view of the conflict, it is evident that he does not have the sensitivity to address the matter clearly or effectively. One odd passage of *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* that several critics have noted with bewilderment concerns his preaching to Golda Meir during his first visit to Israel in 1973: "With some hesitation, I said that I had long taught lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures and that a common historical pattern was that Israel was punished whenever the leaders turned away from devout worship of God. I asked if she was concerned about the secular nature of her Labor government." Carter notes that Meir was taken aback by his "temerity," which of course did not prevent Carter from henceforth describing Meir, based on their one and only meeting, as his "good friend." Carter's use of this anecdote becomes even stranger when one considers that in Israel, the settler movement that Carter so vigorously deplores is in large part fueled by religious Jews who take seriously God's gift, in the Bible, of Israel to the Jewish people—including Judea and Samaria, more commonly known as the West Bank. If Carter were capable of taking ideas seriously, he would not unwittingly encourage the very faction of Israeli society that he most conspicuously detests.

The invocation of his faith in the advancement of his views was common for Carter. He famously "witnessed" (as evangelical Christians call it) his personal faith to heads of state while president, including President Park Chung Hee of South Korea, whom he publicly chided over human-rights violations. South Korea's intelligence service apparently took Carter's disapproval of Chung Hee as a sign that they could get away with assassinating him, which they did a few months later. Yet Carter's theo-politics turn out to be highly selective. In Carter's previous book, *Our Endangered Values*, the tender concern over secularism that he expressed to Meir vanishes as he criticizes President George W. Bush for supposedly breaching the separation of church and state through the modest "faith-based initiative" that sought to encourage government cooperation with religious organizations that provide valuable social services. He also criticized Pope John Paul II's anti-communism, thinking it hindered the growth of the Catholic Church in the developing world.

These jejune contradictions reveal a miscellaneous intellect averse to

consistent or compelling thought. Yet such is Carter's self-absorption that he is incapable of seeing "the mote in his own eye," as the New Testament reads, or of apprehending in himself the tragic flaw of pride. Carter revels in his status as an "elder statesman" and as America's "best ex-president," but with *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid* he may have squandered the moral authority he so carefully burnished since leaving the White House, and pushed the scales from the eyes of many of his admirers. It is now likely that more Americans will come to understand the judgment of the late Murray Kempton, who wrote in 1994 that Carter "has no clear idea of the shrine he seeks except that it is built for him."

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