

PEACEFUL *Priorities*

Former President JIMMY CARTER'S Countdown to Zero

Never had I expected that, in my list of extraordinary events, I would be able to pencil in "interview a President". This, in itself, generated some quirky and yet formal preparation, such as researching how to properly address the thirty-ninth President of the United States. Was it "Mister"? Was it "Mister Former President"? I quickly discovered that all my research would be forgotten, as I excitedly began our talk by simply exclaiming his name: "Jimmy Carter!" Immediately I tried to amend my outburst by promptly adding, "Mister President, how are you today?"

Jimmy Carter is not your typical eighty-eight year old; he flies all over the world, has an enormous team of supporters behind him, and his schedule is packed with back-to-back meetings on an almost daily basis, if not in person then even on the newest form of digital-info-dissemination, Google Hangout. He's been governor of the state of Georgia, President of the United States of America, and Laureate of, arguably, the most important award on the planet, the Nobel Peace Prize. It is no wonder that the entire world knows who Jimmy Carter is. As lavish as all this may seem, Mr. Carter's busy schedule and atypical lifestyle is due to his active involvement in a humanitarian cause that has been the central focus of his professional career for the last three decades. After serving his full term in Office from 1977 to 1981, he became head and founder of the Carter Center, a nongovernmental, non-profit organisation, which he started with his wife, Rosalynn Carter, and alongside Emory University. To this day, he continues to actively lead the organisation operating on a mission to advance human rights and alleviate human suffering, all the while seeking to prevent and resolve conflict, enhance freedom and democracy, and improve health.

In theory, the Carter Center sounds like a knight in shining armour, making tall promises to come and save the day. In practice? This is exactly what it is. For over thirty years, the Carter Center has established itself as an organisation that turns its words into actions, and its actions into concrete quantifiable results. It has been a saviour to millions of underprivileged people in the world, particularly in Africa and Asia, and it has fought to bring peace among warring nations, as well as bringing healthcare to disease-ridden countries. It has been their level of commitment and effective results which earned Jimmy Carter the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, making him the fourth U.S. President to receive the prize and the only one of them to be awarded it while no longer in Office.

Thirteen years after the award, Jimmy Carter and his organisation remain relevant and steadfastly spirited in their mission. Proof of this lies in one particularly admirable accomplishment: the Carter Center is close



President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, visited children suffering from schistosomiasis during their 15 Feb 2007, trip to Nasarawa, North Nigeria. The Carters travelled to the community to bring international attention to the country's need to make disease prevention methods and treatments more accessible for rural and impoverished communities

to completely eradicating an illness by the name of 'Guinea worm disease'. If they succeed, this will be the second disease in history to be eliminated entirely, and it will be the first to do so without the aid of medicine or vaccines. Unlike Smallpox, which was eradicated in 1977, Guinea worm disease has no medicinal cure, and the Carter Center has had to fiercely deal with other methods of prevention and treatment, which are more time-consuming and complicated than simply injecting a chemical substance into the bloodstream.

Containing and treating a massive infection like Guinea worm is not solved by quarantine or by simply staying away from a person that is

contaminated. Guinea worm is contracted through the ingestion of water that is contaminated with a nematode roundworm parasite, also known as a water flea. These infected waters contain the worm's larvae which, once inside the human body, hatch and begin to mate and grow within the abdomen. After incubating for a year, the female worm begins to create a painful lesion in the person's skin, as it attempts to leave the human body. In an effort to relieve the burning pain caused by the worm's abrasion, the contaminated person's instincts lead

them to seek a water source and immerse their limbs in it. Upon contact with the water, the emerging worm releases its larvae into the water, and thus the contamination cycle begins once again.

Whenever a parasitic contamination is spread through water it immediately creates an enormously complex problem, because water is vital for human survival and impossible to stay away from. Similarly, since the disease begins in the form of tiny larvae, you cannot visibly identify the contamination points. The fact that the spread is cyclical, beginning and then ending back again in water, makes it even more challenging to contain the disease, especially when we take into account the statistics. Guinea worm disease was not based in one region, nor in one country or even in

Photograph by The Carter Center/E. Staub



Jimmy Carter shakes hands with a young boy in Mosebo, Ethiopia, during a visit to commend the efforts of the Ambara Region to prevent trachoma, a painful and debilitating disease that causes blindness

“There’s no doubt that conflict is a very heavy obstacle to the people’s WELL-BEING.”

one continent; in 1986, an astounding 3.5 million people in twenty-one countries in Africa and Asia were reported to have been infected with Guinea worm, incapacitating them and impeding them from being able to go to work, care for their families, or attend school. How, then, do you treat an infection of such high magnitude when the water-based contamination is ongoing?

Because the spread of Guinea worm disease comes largely as a product of instinctual human behaviour, Jimmy Carter and the Carter Center have been promoting education about the disease, to foster daily-life choices that will stop it from spreading. They have made massive efforts to educate people about how the disease works, how it is spread and how to undertake safe methods of ingesting water. The Carter Center advises people to refrain “from entering sources of drinking water with an active infection and to educate households to always use cloth filters to sieve out tiny water fleas carrying infective larvae.” On paper this sounds simple enough, but teaching millions of people to change their daily behaviour is a monumental task involving the cooperation of people at a macro-scale, and it only addresses half of the issue, which is the contamination cycle. However, the other half of the problem still needed to be addressed: how do you treat it? With no medicine or vaccine known, the only way to remove the worm is to wind it up around a stick and manually extract it. Some worms can grow up to three feet in length, meaning that the process has been known to be very painful and can take several weeks to be completed.

Twenty-seven years after the Carter Center initiated its efforts, only Sudan, Chad, Mali and Ethiopia remain with cases of the infection, from the twenty-one countries affected by the outbreak. With merely 542 provisional cases remaining from the original 3.5 million, the Carter Center, along with other organisations who have collaborated with it, have staggeringly and successfully wiped out over 99% of Guinea worm disease. As the numbers continue to dwindle, Jimmy Carter and his organisation patiently and diligently make a countdown to eradication, the moment of Zero Cases.

It was this, and his many other achievements, that I wanted to discuss with Jimmy Carter, including his thoughts on human rights and his views

on the relationship between peace and health and how these two have played an intrinsic part in his formation as a man, a politician and a humanitarian. (And in tune with our theme for this issue, I even managed to sneak in a bit of romance somewhere in between!)

Let’s start by briefly introducing the Carter Center. It operates from the belief that you need health to have peace. What is the correlation between the two?

We believe that pre-eminently, among human beings, is a right to live in peace and a right to have adequate healthcare, as well as a modicum of education, so each person can use their natural abilities and talents and have opportunities. I would say that one of the most devastating threats to health is to have war in countries, particularly a civil war, where the international standards don’t prevail. Giving people good health is a very important aspect. Also, those who are trying to help, like the Carter Center, in areas of Southern Sudan, North-western Mali, or earlier in Ghana, were handicapped severely by the fact that civil war and conflicts are still going on there, and we can’t get our health personnel to go in. There’s no doubt that conflict is a very heavy obstacle to the people’s well-being, their health, their safety, and the delivery of health care from outside.

How do you believe the concept of peace has changed from the time you were in office to our current condition in the twenty-first century?

(He chuckles) When I was in office I was constantly promoting peace in different parts of the world: in what was known as Rhodesia, that changed into Zimbabwe; in Southern Africa; in the long-time estrangement between our country and China; the constant series of wars between Israel and Egypt. The active promotion of peace for my country and for other nations was a very important part for me throughout my administration. I think the elevation of peace as a top priority for the White House and for the Congress is something that is not present now, and I hope we’ll see that possibility evolve in the future.

Being in Office must surely have a profound impact on how you work with the Carter Center today. How did your experience in the White House and in politics change, fortify or inspire your pursuit for equality, human rights and peace?

I have to say that being in the White House gave me the prestige, influence, knowledge and access to other leaders that have been helpful since I left Office. We were constantly trying to promote higher levels of U.S. aid in the fields of education and health, and the alleviation of poverty and suffering, but a lot of that, when I was in the White House, was a competition between us and the Soviet Union; it was during the Cold War Era. Since I left the White House, though, I have used what insight and experience I had as President to guide the Carter Center, and establish our own priorities. To my surprise, during the last 30 years the priority has changed from negotiating peace agreements between warring parties to the promotion of health care, so now the majority of total people and money that go through the Carter Center is devoted to the improvement of health care. I think this is something that originated from not only my time as President, but even earlier when I was governor, and even from

Photograph by The Carter Center



Photograph by The Carter Center/L. Gubb

Guinea worm disease is a major impediment to a farmer’s ability to work. Dressed in his farming clothes, Nuru Ziblim, a Guinea worm health volunteer in Ghana, educates children on how to use pipe filters when they go to the fields with their families, allowing people to filter their water to avoid contracting the disease

seeing my mother as a registered nurse care for people during the depression years.

You have dedicated the last three decades of your life to the eradication of the Guinea Worm disease. With the numbers dwindling to the last few cases, how at peace do you feel with your work?

I feel at peace with it, because there’s no doubt that we’ve done the best we could. We’ve met enormous challenges and difficulties and overcome them all. We’ve had years where we couldn’t get into areas that had Guinea Worm, and we finally prevailed after waiting patiently. We even had difficulties sending in equipment to areas that were torn apart by war, so I feel very confident that there’s nothing that we could have done to expedite the process. It’s just a slow, tedious and sometimes frustrating effort that is finally approaching success. I’m very happy, pleased and satisfied with the work we’ve done.

You mention it’s a slow process, but did you anticipate that you would help this many people and eradicate 99.9% of the disease in the time that you’ve dedicated to it?

At first we thought we could do it more quickly, but we underestimated the devastating impact of a twenty-year war in South Sudan, as well as the conflicts that had taken place in Mali, Ghana and other countries. Also, we’ve had to understand that, on occasion, the workers in some countries have become somewhat overconfident, and they haven’t monitored the situation as closely as they can, and we’ve had to deal with some re-outbreaks of Guinea worm, particularly in Northern Ghana. And so I was expecting it to be an earlier success, but looking back on it I can see why those problems arose, and I think now we have a very

Photograph by The Carter Center

accurate assessment of the challenges. We are making good progress on all of them.

Let’s say you had thirty more, healthy years with the Carter Center, after Guinea worm disease is eradicated. What would your work focus on?

There’s no doubt that we’ll consider more work with our health programmes, because we also have five other diseases that we are addressing already. We have the only place on earth that analyses all the human illnesses on a regular basis, to see which ones might theoretically be eliminated from a particular region or eradicated from the entire world, and it’s called the International Task Force for Disease Eradication. So we’ll continue our work with the other diseases: trachoma, river blindness, schistosomiasis, lymphatic filariasis, and with malaria, in addition to Guinea worm. Then, when Guinea Worm is no longer on the agenda to be eradicated, we’ll look into taking another disease to keep us at the same level of effort.

Sounds like a tremendous effort, and your life is already so busy, to say the least. What gives you the strength to get up every day and continue working with the Carter Center?



The Carter Center’s pipe filters are used to avoid Guinea Worm larvae being ingested through drinking water



Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Carter leave the rural Ethiopian village of Afeta, Jimma Region, after inspecting Carter Center-assisted health preventative measures against onchocerciasis (river blindness) and malaria

(He lets out another chuckle) Well it's interesting, it's unpredictable, it's an adventure, it's always challenging, and I would say that in the long term it's gratifying, and I get more out of it in my own life than I put into it, so it's a profitable thing to do as far as my own consciousness and my own life is concerned.

Speaking of which, you've had an incredible life with peak moments that ordinary people don't experience... Professionally you've been elected Governor, elected President, won the Nobel Peace Prize, accomplished numerous peace treaties like the Guinea Worm Cease-Fire; what's been the most important moment of your life thus far?

I think the most important moment is when my wife agreed to marry me sixty-seven years ago. That's the most important thing that's happened in my life! We have a wonderful family. As far as my political life is concerned, I've been grateful for a chance to work on human rights and peace; those two things are the most important points of my life: working on human rights and peace.

Do you feel like you've ever been witness to an overwhelming moment of

peace, and if so, what was it?

I believe the most dramatic single moment was when the Israelis and Egyptians agreed to end a long-time war between themselves. That peace agreement, which concluded in 1979, will be thirty-four years old in a few days, and not a single word of it has ever been violated. I have a regret, though. The other agreement, to grant Palestinian rights, has not been honoured. Peace between Israel and Egypt was a high point, but we still have a long way to go to give the Palestinians what they deserve, and that is peace with justice.

What has been the most valuable lesson you've learnt from your experience, both as President and as a philanthropist with the Carter Center?

I would say not to underestimate other people. We've worked with some of the poorest and



Photograph by The Carter Center / L. Gubb

While at the containment centre in Savalugu, Ghana, Sadia Mesuna and her friend Fatawu Yakubu look at a picture book about Guinea worm disease, learning that "you get Guinea worm from the water. If you drink it unfiltered, you get Guinea worm."

Photograph by The Carter Center / L. Gubb

most deprived families on earth, both in the Carter Center's work and by building homes with Habitat for Humanity, and I would say the most important thing I've learnt is that those people who are sometimes underestimated by us are just as intelligent, just as hard-working, just as ambitious, and their family values are just as good as mine. I think that we people who live in the rich part of the world underestimate the quality of life of the people who suffer from poverty, deprivation and disease.

I want to end our talk by asking you about the moment when we reach Zero Cases. It's been nearly thirty years of intense labour dedicated to the eradication of Guinea Worm disease. How do the words "zero cases", which are steadily approaching, make you feel?

I'm very excited about it, but I'm not taking anything for granted. Always, in the effort to eradicate disease, those last few cases are the most difficult and the most expensive. Also, in the case of Guinea Worm, we have to be constantly alert to make sure that we don't face another unanticipated outbreak of the illness, especially in areas that have previously been thought to be clean and free of the disease.

I'm approaching the time of Zero Cases with increasing anticipation, great gratitude for the many people in the world that have joined us in this effort, and I'm convinced that we'll see this success come during my lifetime. I think it's very likely that this will be the second disease in the history of the world to be completely eradicated from the face of the earth.

With that, I thanked President Carter for his time, we said our goodbyes and I expressed my wishes for

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the success of his and the Carter Center's work; to which he replied in his classic Southern accent, "Well thank you very much, I've enjoyed it! You had some good questions. I hope you have a good day."

The day after I interviewed President Carter, his associate director, Emily Staub, with whom I must have exchanged almost a hundred emails, sent me a quick message. There was some office buzz going on post-interview, and Emily, aware of our summer issue's theme of romance, wrote, "I heard that President Carter said Rosalynn saying 'yes' to his marriage proposal was the most important event in his life. I think every girl in the world would love to hear the husband (or significant other for that matter) say that! You know, after all these years they still hold hands everywhere they go, it's so sweet." Attached to her email was a picture of President Carter holding his wife's hand in one of their trips with the Carter Center; I smiled upon seeing it, as it became clear to me that no matter the age or the circumstances, romance can be found anywhere you go; even as a couple going on sixty-seven years of marriage, resolutely trekking the jungles of Ethiopia in the pursuit of peace.

— By Regner Ramos