

Movie Review: 'Jimmy Carter, Man From Plains'

by *David_Elliott*

Historians will long debate Jimmy Carter's presidency (1977-1981), and the blog-bog fever ticks will long despise him.

'JIMMY CARTER, MAN FROM PLAINS' - 'Jimmy Carter, Man From Plains,' directed by Jonathan Demme, examines the fruitful life of the former president since he left office more than 25 years ago. CNS Photo courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) But already there is virtual consensus that Carter is our greatest ex-president. This might not change even if Bill Clinton returns to the White House as Mrs. President's helpful, uh, adviser.

Not even barnstormer Bill can match the range of activities shown in Jonathan Demme's fond but not mushy documentary, "Jimmy Carter, Man From Plains." Carter's 82, out of the White House more than 25 years and fully entitled to a long drink or two on the 19th hole, but here he is:

Helping build a house in ravaged New Orleans, one of many Habitat sites he helped fashion; trading smart quips with Jay Leno; presiding at his do-good Carter Center in Atlanta; smiling at an Israeli reporter who looks eager to eat him; surveying his family's farm; swimming, almost daily; answering endless mail; showing zeal for a neighbor's fried chicken; endlessly traveling, carrying his own bags; delivering sermons in church; visiting foreign lands and (so he tells us) reading the Bible before bed in Spanish with wife Rosalynn - truth be told, his Spanish accent is pretty bad.

Rosalynn, maybe our top former first lady since Eleanor Roosevelt, except (possibly) Mrs. Clinton, is more often on her cell phone than screen. For Demme mostly trails Carter on his gruelling 2006 book tour, for the lightning bolt treatise on Palestine.

Though he lost the image duel to Ronald Reagan in 1980, the Plains-man knows media. He surely guessed that putting "apartheid" in his book's title would rouse the hornets, and assure major TV and radio. How capably Carter explains his choice and deflects heated rhetoric (anti-Israel, anti-Semitic, etc.) is the film's drumroll dialogue.

Apart from brisk asperity with a ranter who managed to grab some phone time, the ex-prez is always very civil. Part of that is in being 82, more is being hardened to politics, even more is being a practicing Christian.

Professor Alan Dershowitz of Harvard, a man who tends to confuse his ego with the Mosaic burning bush, tried to bait Carter into a debate at Brandeis. Carter said no, not from fear but on the sensible grounds that Brandeis could provide its own Socrates.

Then - with his smiling but sad-eyed blend of teach, preach and gentle admonition - he won over the students. They found not just a former president, but a good and even great man.

A Sony Pictures Classics release at Landmark Hillcrest Cinemas. Director: Jonathan Demme. Editor: Kate Amend. Cast: Jimmy Carter, Rosalynn Carter, Alan Dershowitz, Jay Leno, Tavis Smiley, Al Franken. Running time: 1 hou, 35 minutes. Rated PG. 3 1/2 stars.

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