

Oops! The truth

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

In all the consternation over former President Jimmy Carter's outspoken criticism of the Bush administration's foreign policy, one fact shouldn't be lost: Carter had a point. To quote Carter, "as far as the adverse impact on the nation around the world, this administration has been the worst in history."

Former presidents usually don't speak harshly about their successors, which is why Carter has backtracked since his remarks to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette were published last Saturday. "I wasn't comparing the overall administration and I certainly wasn't talking personally about any president," a chagrined Carter said Monday in New Orleans, where he was helping build a house for a victim of Hurricane Katrina on behalf of Habitat for Humanity.

The incident was touched off Saturday when the Little Rock newspaper published an interview in which one its reporters had asked Carter, "Which president was worse, George W. Bush or Richard Nixon?"

This is the sort of loaded question an adept politician usually dodges, but adeptness was never Carter's strength. First he made his "adverse impact" remarks. Then he followed up with "The overt reversal of America's basic values as expressed by previous administrations, including those of George H.W. Bush and Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon and others, has been the most disturbing to me." The next day a White House spokesman responded that the comments were "sad" and that Carter was "irrelevant," and the furor was in full flap. Bush, to his credit, refused comment.

True, members of the former presidents club usually are more circumspect - although Theodore Roosevelt once said William Howard Taft was a "puzzlewit" and a "fat head." Former President Gerald Ford told Bob Woodward of The Washington Post that President Bush's incursion into Iraq had been "a big mistake," although he stipulated that the interview could not be published until after his death. But Carter is 82 years old, and people of a certain age often speak with unrestrained candor. Despite the Camp David accords and a Nobel Peace Prize won in 2002 for his post-presidential devotion to human rights, Carter knows firsthand what a disastrous foreign policy looks like.

It looks like this: A pre-emptive war in Iraq, launched despite United Nations opposition, that has helped create a terrorist training ground. A Middle East even more polarized than it was when Bush took office. Rhetoric about the "axis of evil" that has raised hostility levels, even as he pursued war in Iraq and kept his hands off far more dangerous nuclear aspirants. The U.S. Army stretched to the breaking point.

Polls show that Bush, and by extension, the United States, has squandered our moral credibility among our European allies. By walking away from international arms treaties to pursue ballistic missile defense, Bush thumbed his nose at diplomatic solutions that were years in the making. By refusing to sign the Kyoto Protocols, he signaled to the world that the United States wasn't interested in accepting any responsibility - or

showing any leadership - in the effort to create a global response to global warming. His recent trip to South America suggested that his feud with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has hurt U.S. relations there as well.

Whoever wins the White House in 2008 will inherit all of these messes. We trust Bush will have the good grace not to criticize. All bets are off Carter.

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