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A Fly on the Wall

Rickover's Dinner with President Jimmy Carter



CLAUDE BERUBE

SEP 29, 2024



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Tuesday, October 1, marks the 100th birthday of former President Jimmy Carter.

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included Ollie North and Admiral Rickover's second wife, Eleonore. We met again at her condo in the course of my previous job. She bequeathed all of his personal papers (which amounted to about 250 archival boxes) to my office and, in a memorandum of agreement with the Director of the Nimitz Library, we agreed they should be in Special Collections & Archives so that they could be catalogued, properly preserved, and made immediately available to any and all researchers. As the archivist went through the collection to catalog it, I went through every page—probably tens of thousands of pages including correspondence, transcripts of telephone conversations and interviews, and memoranda for the record. This collection led to my co-edited volume, "[Rickover Uncensored](#);" the corrected 2nd edition will be out in the next month or so.

So many documents stand out from 1929 to 1986, but many deal with President Carter who had interviewed with Admiral Rickover for the Navy's nuclear power program. When Rickover asked him if he had done his best at the Academy, Carter responded that he hadn't. Then Rickover asked, "why not the best?" That phrase eventually became the theme for Carter's 1976 presidential campaign. There was even [a campaign song](#) by folk singer/songwriter Oscar Brand with that title.

Carter sought out Rickover's support early in the campaign. They remained in contact and then communicated regularly when Carter became president. Several of Rickover's memos went directly to Carter, skirting his chain of command.

During one visit to the condo apartment she and the Admiral lived in, Eleonore told me about how she had invited Rosalynn and her family to dinner, without telling Rickover. If you ever wanted to be a fly on the wall to listen to a conversation, this was it. Rickover nearly always wrote a memorandum about his meetings with policymakers. His dinner with Carter was no different. Eleonore probably wanted the Carters to have a relaxing evening. Instead, it was full of policy, both national security and domestic issues.

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7:07		The President, the First Lady, and Amy Carter went to the South Grounds.					
7:08	7:15	The Presidential party motored from the South Grounds to to the residence of the Director of the Division of Naval Reactors, Department of Energy, Hyman G. Rickover and Mrs. Rickover, 2301 Jefferson Davis Highway, Arlington, Virg					
CPD 1979 0-113-97						Page 3 of 4 pages	

THE WHITE HOUSE		THE DAILY DIARY OF PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER	
LOCATION			DATE (Mo., Day, Yr.)
RICKOVER RESIDENCE			MAY 31, 1979
WASHINGTON, D.C.			TIME DAY
			7:15p.m. THURSDAY
TIME		PHONE	ACTIVITY
From	To	P-Placed R-Rec'd	
7:17	9:56		The President had dinner with: The First Lady Amy Carter Adm. Rickover Mrs. Rickover
9:56			The President, the First Lady, and Amy Carter returned to their motorcade. They were accompanied by Adm. and Mrs Rickover.
9:56	10:05		The Presidential party motored from the Rickover residence to the South Grounds of the White House,

(diary image from The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum)

1 June 1979

Memorandum of Conversation with President Carter at my Apartment on 31 May 1979

1. Unbeknownst to me, my wife had invited the President, Mrs. Carter, and Amy to have dinner with us on 31 May. She had told me the dinner was for a friend who belonged to a religious group and would be coming over with her husband, a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force, and their young 10-year-old daughter.

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knock on the door. When I opened the door, in walked President Carter, Rosalynn, and Amy.

3. I later learned that the genesis for this visit was the airplane trip to Groton for the keel-laying ceremony of the GEORGIA by Mrs. Carter. My wife and I had been on the same plane with Mrs. Carter and, on the return trip to Washington, my wife had discussed (without my knowledge) the possibility of having them to dinner. It seems that for the past week many arrangements had been made – telephone calls, security checks by Secret Service personnel, etc., of which I had not been aware.

4. The President and his family were with us for about three hours. This gave me an opportunity to have lengthy discussions on a number of subjects. I will mention them as I remember them, though not necessarily in the order of their occurrence.

- Black Leadership. I said I was distressed with the attitude of the black leadership in the United States. It appeared to me they were more interested in their own self-advancement than in the advancement of the black people. I said I would appreciate his not making any comments on what I was saying in this matter, so that it could never be construed he agreed or disagreed with me. The President said he would make no comments.

I said I had dealt with Benjamin Hooks and Vernon Jordan. I had also met Coretta King on a plane trip two years ago from Washington to Atlanta. I sat next to her and had heard her talking to a companion. When I asked her if she was the wife of Martin Luther King, she said she was. Thereupon I said, “You don’t look as good as your pictures.” For some reason she seemed surprised and distressed at this comment. This was the only opportunity I had to speak with her. She turned away and thereafter talked only with her companion.

I told the President that my impression on all the occasions I have spoken with black leaders was that they were more interested in advancing their own personal interests

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the attitude years ago when wealthy Jewish leaders often took responsibility on themselves to improve the condition of the Jewish people in the United States. I recounted how I had tried to interest Mr. Hooks at a meeting in New York on 9 September 1977, in improving the education of black youth. (Enclosure 1)

As far as the government's attitude and actions relating to minorities was concerned, I told him there had been a letter recently from a black leader to the New York Times stating that the time had come for blacks not to ask for special treatment. I said I would send him a copy of the letter and replies to it. (Enclosure 2)

The President said that Reverend Jesse Jackson was trying to help black youth and I agreed and said I had once talked to him on the telephone and asked that he arrange for us to meet in order to discuss the matter. I had never heard from him. The President replied that he would telephone Jesse Jackson and discuss with him a meeting with me.

Political Action Committees. Next, I discussed the vast power being acquired in the United States by large conglomerates through their lobbyists in Congress. It appeared to me that they were, in essence, running the United States. As a student of history, I knew of no period in the history of the United States, including the 1880's after the Civil War, when lobbying was so prevalent. In those times it was for land, railroads, and mining rights. But today this has extended into all aspects of politics, business, and industry. The President agreed.

- o I told the President that, as far as I could determine, there was considerable suborning of Congress by large campaign contributions from industry to Members of Congress and to State officials from funds that the law permits them to obtain from their officials. I had personally witnessed this in connection with the Renegotiation Board.

- o The President said he fully supported the Renegotiation Act but was not able

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California had obtained the signatures of a majority of House Members to a petition to kill the Act. Later I learned that many of the signers did not know what they were signing.

- o I said it would be a fine thing for the United States if Congress enacted the bill which would give \$75,000 to each Member of Congress toward financing his campaign. The President said he did not think the bill would get through Congress this session.

- The Party System. We then had a lengthy discussion on Congress. I said that the party system had gone by the board. The President was once the leader of his Party, but today Congress was largely fragmented with committees, subcommittees, and their large staffs. These bloated staffs were, for example, keeping Energy Department officials busy testifying and answering questions, so that it was almost impossible to get any work done.

- o I recalled Clarence Cannon's attitude on staffs. I said I had been very close to him when he was Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. In fact, he had invited me to his home where he played the piano for me. Time and again the members of his committee had urged him to increase the staff. He had invariably refused to do so. I said I considered this was an excellent example to follow in view of the great proliferation of congressional staffs in recent years. For example, the Energy Department must now deal with about 38 committees and subcommittees. This means that all Energy Department officials have most of their time taken up testifying. The President agreed.

- o The President mentioned that he received considerable help from Senator Byrd, the Majority Leader of the Senate, but he did not get as much help from Congressman O'Neil, the Speaker of the House.

- o I mentioned that Mussolini had set up a corporate state in Italy in 1921. He had

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the Italian Parliament among government, industry, and the public. However, as this fascist system actually worked out, the representatives from government and industry actually controlled the government; the representatives of the people had little power.

- SALT Talks. I told the President I thought it would be a good idea to consummate the SALT talks quickly in order to reduce tension between the United States and Russia. I once more recommended that upon consummation of the SALT Treaty, he should initiate naval disarmament talks to reduce the cost of military forces throughout the world. He made no comment.
- Fast Russian Submarine. The President asked about the Russian 40-knot submarine. I said that our 688-Class, by taking certain measures could probably make about four knots more than its present speed and we would therefore be close to the Russian's speed. I said the Russian submarine was a test vehicle and not a complete combat submarine as was the 688.
 - o I said that while issues were being made that we were behind the Russians in speed and numbers of ships, the Navy civilian sector was recommending at the same time that we reduce the speed of our submarines. I said the 688-Class was a fine submarine and should be continued.
- The Naval Nuclear Program. I told the President that I had never spoken out against any administration stand on the Navy or any other matter. He agreed with that. However, in connection with the aircraft carrier, I said I considered him to be in error in advocating a 53,000 ton carrier which could only carry a small number of planes. I said if there was to be an additional carrier, it should be nuclear powered for reasons he well knew – particularly with the oil crisis becoming more severe. I could see no purpose in spending money to build a 53,000-ton carrier or even a Kennedy Class carrier if his objective was to save money. I recommended that he cancel his request for any carrier other than a nuclear one. I said I knew it was not my decision to make

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operation – but if there were to be another carrier, it should be nuclear powered.

- o I mentioned there were now 12 carriers in operation. How that number had been decided I did not know, and suggested this should be looked into. I said that possibly the National Security Council had decided the number.
- Shipbuilding Claims. I told the President that at the present time two grand juries were investigating the Newport News Shipbuilding and Dry Dock Company; the Electric Boat Division of General Dynamics on potential fraud.
- DC 10. I said that it may be worthwhile having the FAA investigate whether there were requirements for routine inspections of this aircraft. Also whether records were kept, and whether these were listed in detail and whether those persons conducting the inspections signed for each item inspected. Also, whether the basic design of the plane had even been checked by an agency other than the company that designed and manufactured it.
 - o I said that in the Navy's nuclear program we had kept records from the beginning of each item to see that it had met all inspections. In fact, we had records of each weld in the ship, as well as for the equipment installed going back to when it was being manufactured. We could go back years later and consult the records of the welding rod used, who made the weld, who inspected it, and the signatures of those who certified the work.
 - o I suggested it might be worthwhile to see what similar standards were used in the aviation industry.
- Interviews for Entry into the Navy's Nuclear Program. I mentioned earlier that day I had interviewed 25 candidates for entry into the nuclear propulsion program. Of course, I knew that I had three or more people interview each candidate before I conducted the final interview. I recalled two interviews that were particularly

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o The first was with a student who did well in his class but had studied little. During my questioning, it developed that his father was paying the student's expenses through college. I asked the student whether he was playing fair with his father by using the latter's money and not studying. The student finally agreed that he was not fair. Thereupon I asked him to write to his father and tell him what I said about his conduct in this matter, and to send me a copy of his father's reply. I happened to have this letter (Enclosure 3) close at hand and I let the President read it.

o The other candidate was a Dartmouth student who had been interviewed by five leading people at Naval Reactors, all of whom had recommended that he not be selected. After two discussions, I decided that he was intelligent, worked hard, and probably would get through our school. I had therefore accepted him contrary to the advice of my people.

o I told the President of a recent case where I had interviewed a black student from a small Southern black college. I believed he was familiar with the caliber of these colleges. This student had a SAT score of 800, the lowest I had ever seen for an applicant for the nuclear program. To put this in perspective, the minimum SAT score required by the Naval Academy was 1200. I had decided to accept this man over the advice of the interviewers. In my discussions with this black applicant, it developed that he came from a very poor farming family and had little chance for education. I considered that with his apparent intelligence, and the fact he had worked hard in school to overcome his educational shortcomings, I was willing to take a chance on him and so I accepted him for our school. This was the first time I had ever accepted anyone with a SAT score lower than 1050.

· The Media. The President talked about the many inaccuracies attributed to him by the press, and gave a number of examples by newspaper reporters. Even after he had advised them of the errors, they still did not print proper retractions. He said that

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o I asked the President whether he liked his job. He said he was quite comfortable with it and did not mind the criticism too much. He would keep on doing what he thought was best regardless of what the press and others said about him.

o I brought up the subject of the articles in the Atlantic Monthly by Jim Fallows who had been on the White House staff; these articles had been critical of the President's conduct in office. He said that Fallows had been a relatively minor member of the staff and had no direct dealings with him.

o I then said there had been considerable criticism in the press concerning the members of this staff from Georgia. He replied that these were good men; in fact nearly all members of his staff from Georgia had been with him for over eight years and that he had personally chosen them. I said I had observed that his staff members were no longer avid for publicity as had been the case at the beginning of his term when their private affairs and other personal matters had been openly discussed in the press. I said I believed it was an excellent move that now kept his staff as anonymous as possible.

· Reorganization of the Defense Department. I told the President about the recent discussion I had with Peter Szanton of the Office of Management and Budget concerning the reorganization of the Defense Department; a study initiated by the President himself. He replied he knew nothing of this, and would look into the matter. Mr. Szanton had visited me to get my views about the Defense Department. In a conversation several days later, he said he had taken the matter up with the Head of the Office of Management and Budget and was told that nothing could be done because the time was now too close to the national election. The President said this was not true. I also said I had telephoned Mr. Eizenstat twice to tell him this, but he never received a reply.

· Organizations. In connection with eliminating useless jobs in the Federal

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number of people in an organization. The organization must be completely eliminated. In other words, the only permanent way is to extirpate it entirely.

- General Robert E. Lee. I expressed my opinion that General Lee, in view of his position in the Confederacy, should have told the Southern leaders after Gettysburg and Vicksburg that he could no longer hope to win the war. Thus the ultimate loss of life and wealth to the Confederacy would have been lessened. In view of his position in the Confederacy, his advice would probably have been heeded. The President was not certain he could agree.

- Visit with the Pope. Mrs. Carter mentioned her recent visit with Pope John Paul II at which Amy was also present. Amy had a number of items she wished the Pope to bless. Every time she placed the items in front of him, he had other thoughts and would change the subject. This happened several times. I never did find out whether the Pope blessed the items.

- o I told the President and Mrs. Carter about the time in 1957 when I had visited the Vatican. I had been taken by the curator through a long corridor containing many ancient works of art. I asked Mrs. Carter if she had seen these. She said she had and was quite impressed.

- o I asked if she had also visited the room in the Vatican which contained the four frescoes painted by Raphael. She did not remember it at first but, as I recounted the details, she said she did see it. I mentioned my visit to the Vatican when the frescoes were being renovated. Mrs. Carter was quite interested in this story.



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ExJuniorSailor ExJuniorSailor's Substack Oct 30

Neat history!! My dad, a WWII vet and submariner, was rejected by the Admiral in his brief, minur long interveiw. It basically amounted to the Admiral saying, "you can't teach an old dog new trick Dismissed."

 LIKE  REPLY



Randy (Rando) Needham Sep 29

FASCINATING!

Thanks, Claude.

 LIKE  REPLY