

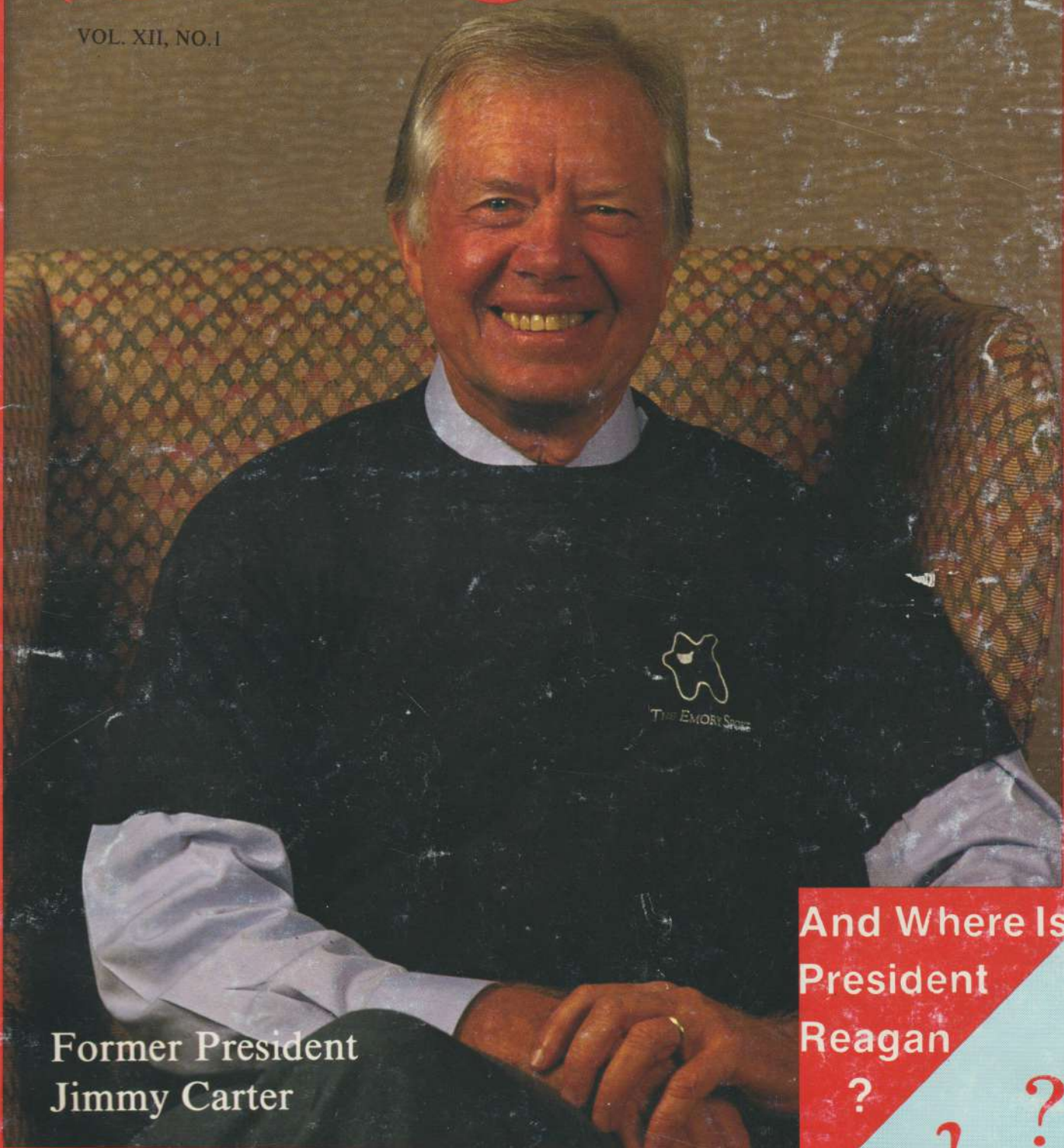
DECEMBER 7, 1987

FREE

SPOKE

MAN OF THE YEAR

VOL. XII, NO.1



Former President
Jimmy Carter

And Where Is
President
Reagan

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JIMMY CARTER



The Untouchables (from l): Adelson, Leary, Carter, Levey, Binney.

Photo by Narayan Sengupta.

by
Robert J. Binney

A lot of thought went into the selection of the 1988 "Man of the Year." SPOKE wanted someone with a great deal of wit, a certain amount of leadership potential, but, above all else, someone pretty damn impressive to put on the cover. Other criteria were: must be a former President (of either the U.S.A. or the U.P.C.); must be Southern; and must now be an employee of Emory University, no matter how distinguished an professorialship he may have. And that is how we came upon Jimmy Carter.

The Editorial Board of the SPOKE met with the former President in his conference room (which is larger than all of our apartments and dormrooms combined) at the one-year-old Carter Center of Emory University. A most impressive facility, it bears distinction due to its lovely, palatial grounds, the fact that it houses the man we were after, and the lobby has Andy Warhol paintings in it.

Overleaf: The Oval Office Mock-up at the Carter Library. Photo courtesy, Carter Library Archives.



Man of the Year

You have been President of the United States, one of the highest honors one can ever have, and now you have been selected as *The Spoke's* "Man of the Year." How does that compare to anything else you've ever had?

Well, it's a *tremendous* anticlimax. One of the most notable anticlimaxes of my life.

While President, what was the funniest thing that happened to you, or that happened in the White House at the time?

Well, you know when they took the American hostages, it wasn't funny.

And when we signed the treaty between Israel and Egypt, it wasn't funny.

You mean just around, in the family?

Anything. Did you, say, stuff the toilets with paper so they would explode?

I remember that when we first got to the White House, Rosalynn was going around, talking to the chefs, who obviously were accustomed to fixing very fancy food, and she was telling them that we liked "Southern" food; like a lot of greens, cornbread and buttermilk and so forth. And they said, "No problem, no problem: we fix that for the help all the time."

Was being President more or less pressure than you had expected it to be?

It was less *pressure* than the long campaigning, because once you become President, there's almost unlimited access to staff work and information, resources (from) around the world, you have ambassadors in every country, you have experts from the scientific and agricultural and academic world, who can provide you with brief summaries of data. And, as Harry Truman said, "A lot of times you issue orders, and nothing happens." You have to get accustomed to that.

But, I think that the life in the White House, for me, was very enjoyable.

Did it ever get boring? Were there times when you'd just sit there and say, "Okay, what now?"

No, you always have at least as much as you can do. The first thing I did when I got to the White House - well, not the first thing, but within the first month or two - I took a speed-reading course, because I had about three hundred pages of documents that I felt I really needed to understand every day. And I was taking them home at night. But after I took the speed-reading course, I quadrupled my reading speed, which was already fairly rapid, then I never needed to take any homework back to the White House.

But you were already home.

That's one of the nice things about being President: you do live (there). And transportation from your dwelling to your office...it's never cold (walking to work).

During a press conference, have you ever wanted to turn to a reporter and say, "That's a really *dumb* question"? Have you ever just wanted to haul off and take a swing at a reporter?

Yes, and this is one of (those times).

I remember when I first left the White House, I was going through an airport and I was kind of trying to avoid the press: I wanted to be alone with my own thoughts and meditations about the causes of my defeat and what I was going to do next with my life and so forth. I had to go to Chicago, on business, and something had happened concerning Reagan - I don't remember what it was - but when I got to the Chicago airport, there were a whole bunch of reporters there, and I was standing with my bags, and (the press) were gathered around with photographers and TV cameras. Then one of the TV folks said, "Mr. President, we are too close. Could you step back a couple of feet?" And I said, "Hell, no, *you* step back two feet!"

It was really a delightful realization that I didn't need to let reporters push me around anymore.



President Carter hard at work in the Oval Office
Maybe he could tell President Reagan how it's done.

This year, a lot of Democratic Presidential candidates have been dropping out of the race for various reasons. At the same time, a lot of good things are being said about your administration. If, by process of elimination, you were given the opportunity to run again, would you?

No.

First of all, to be honest, I don't think I could be elected.

Secondly, I've found now for myself a new and very challenging and unpredictable and adventurous and uncertain and gratifying life.

And, we've got a number of

projects under way that, under a responsible White House administration, could contribute a great deal to peace in the Middle East, to the alleviation of international conflicts, to the promotion of human rights, to helping with suffering people who starve and have health problems. So, I think that there is a place for a former President to serve beneficially, using his experience and background and access to leaders and some access to the press, like *the Spoke*, ummmm...

Also, to do some things with the incumbent President. I don't have that relationship with Reagan, unfortunately. But, I think no matter who is President in the future will be a great improvement.

If you could say one thing about President Reagan behind his back, what would it be?

Well, he just doesn't know how to tell the truth, and the American people are very forgiving about it.

He'll have a press conference, as he did, say, last November after the Iran-*contra* story began to break, and when you go back and analyze the press conference now, there's not a single item in it which is true. There's just a constant series of misstatements. Whether they were deliberate or out of ignorance, that's the question. It's not whether or not he tells the truth, it's "Why does he *not* tell the truth?"

If you could say one thing to his face, what would it be?

I have said the same thing - not to his face but on the telephone because all the way through the last six years, there has been a repetitious effort on his part to blame a mistake, or an embarrassment, or a problem or a disappointment or a failure on someone else: either the congress, and most frequently, his predecessors in

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office. Not just me, but on Ford and Nixon as well.

When we lost the Marines in Lebanon, he made a speech the following day to some audience in the Midwest, and he said it wasn't *his* fault, it was the fault of his predecessors in the White House, who had so damaged the intelligence capabilities of our nation, that he had been misinformed about the circumstances in the Middle East. I happened to be watching TV that night, it was a major news story, and I got furious. So the next day I called a press conference, the only one I've ever called since I left office, and the press came, quite eagerly, because I hadn't done that before or since. And I condemned him for making an absolute misstatement of fact, and there was quite a furor in Washington about it; and he, ultimately, was confronted by the press there, and he informed the press that he would get it straightened out.

It kind of put him on the spot, so he called me on the phone, and the first thing he did was to tell me that *I* had been misinformed, that he hadn't made any such statement. I said, "Mr. President, I was watching television last night, I *saw* you and heard you make that statement." And he said, "Well, it was just a misstatement." And I said, "Well, while I've got you on the phone, there's some other mistakes I'd like to cover," so I delineated those, and he said, "I'll never make those misstatements again."

Well, he kept his promise. I'd say for ten days, two weeks...

Are there any favorites of yours?

His most common one is that all during my administration and his predecessors' defense capabilities of our country were weakened. As a matter of fact, I *increased* the defense budget every year I was in office. I'm a military man by training and background, and the statistics are there. But, he likes to make that point, that when he came into office everything was a horrible mess, and he has *courageously* repaired the damage of his predecessors.

But, I think most people in the press and many people in the public realize that when he *does* make a misstatement of that kind, there's some doubt about its thrust.

The museum here (at the Carter Center) has an entire exhibit of items presented to you, while President, from foreign countries. What's the strangest one ever given to you?

(On the sixth of October), I had the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka here. When he made his official visit back when I was in the White House, they brought us a miniature elephant bejeweled with all the precious stones of Nepal, and also a real elephant. He sent it to Amy, a baby elephant, which she graciously transferred from the White House to the National Zoo, in Washington.

Were there a lot of practical jokes pulled in the White House? Any friendly rivalries?

Sometimes, Dr. Brzhynski and I had kind of a running struggle with practical jokes. He was so... Actually, a President can do more practical jokes than subordinates can, subordinates are very timid about these things around a President.

But, Brzhyenski and I had an exchange of practical jokes. I remember once he was sitting in the rose garden with Ambassador Dobrynin and on the table there was a bottle of Russian vodka that Dobrynin had brought as a gift, and a bowl of caviar. And there was a crow, in the photograph, that had happened to land on the grass. The White House photographer, who took a telephoto picture of this, gave it to me, and I inscribed on the table, "At least the crow was sober."

He spent an enormous amount of his time encouraging us to normalize diplomatic relations with China, including going to China and so forth. (When) we finally realized that we had been successful, Dr. Brzhyenski was riding in his car, and I called him on his car radio. He left the car radio and went to a pay station to call me, and I had my secretary notify him that the entire negotia-

tions with China had broken down, that we had *not* been successful in normalizing relations with China. He had gone home to change clothes to come back for the press conference to announce that we *had*! So we did a few things like that.

What would you do in the White House if you wanted a Big Mac? More importantly, does Domino's (Pizza) deliver to the White House?

Domino's *does* deliver to the White House.

Do you know this from experience?

Well, we did have a few pizzas delivered to the White House, but I don't remember if it was Domino's or who delivered them. As a matter of fact, we enjoyed a Domino's pizza last night, and I found out they had ninety stores in the metropolitan Atlanta area.

Is this a paid commercial endorsement?

Ahhh...

Anyway, it was very easy to do that, because the first year or two, three of our children lived in the White House with us. Amy, and two of our boys were always out in the *real* world, and they would bring into the White House what they wanted or what we wanted.

When I wanted to do something by myself, I was most often able to. One Sunday afternoon, we decided to see *Madame Butterfly* at the Kennedy Center, and not tell the press about it. So we went over and saw *Madame Butterfly*, and it came out in the news the following morning, and 1200 reporters in the White House newsroom were *furious* that we had stepped out.

I ran about forty miles a week, when I was President, I was a very avid runner, and about half the time I would run on the South Lawn of the White House, where we had a one-mile track laid out; in the shrubbery, around the tennis court, through the Rose Garden. But about half the time I'd go out and run alongside the C&O Canal. The newsmedia monitor the Secret Service radio frequencies, so when I'd get ready to run, we either did it by written notes or by telephone, and only once did I get caught by the press running. I just happened to meet this CBS cameraman who was also a jogger, and he ran quickly to a nearby telephone and called back in. When I got to the next bridge, there was a phalanx of reporters there, so I turned around and went back to my car.

But anyway, we could do a few things back then that most commoners couldn't do. We would land inside Camp David - the press is not allowed inside Camp David, that's one of the great attractions about it - they would watch me leave the helicopter, waiting for me to get hit on the head by the helicopter blade, or to fall down. And when I didn't have an accident, they would leave and go to a nearby town in Maryland. We would go into Camp David, change into fishing clothes, come back and get on the same helicopter, and fly 35 more minutes up into Pennsylvania, and fish for the weekend, and the press never knew about it.

Until now.

Do you drive your own car at all?

Sure. When I was President I used to come down to Georgia on brief weekend vacations, mostly to visit my farm on Sackimah Island. And on Sackimah, I always had a jeep that I drove around myself.

What kind of jeep? Military?

Just a regular jeep. J-E-E-P, jeep. It was fairly new and in nice shape...

Do you still have a driver's license?

Sure.

Do you just go down to DMV and stand in line with everyone else when you need it renewed?

Well, it's a Veteran's license that's renewable now, but I don't have to.

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If you could take one record onto a desert island with you, what would it be?

Music? (*long pause*) Well now, (*pause*) that would be hard to say. (*a really long pause*) I'll give you three records. I'd either take *Lieberstoke* by Wagner, I like the last movement best; or Bob Dylan's *Greatest...* I'd like to take both (Volume I and II), if you'll permit me; and a Willie Nelson. If I had to choose one of those, I think it might be Willie Nelson.

When I was in the White House, when I needed relaxation, I would go into my study and tie flies, which are used for fly-fishing, and put on a Willie Nelson tape. We had a *superb* sound system in the living quarters.

Japanese?

I'm sure it was American. As a matter of fact, some of the best sound systems in the world are made by an American firm, owned by Sidney Harmon; he produces sound systems in Japan, and he's a very successful competitor with the best of the Japanese.

Another endorsement?

He just happened to be my Deputy Secretary of Commerce, and also contributed for the sound system in the museum.

What do you do for entertainment?

We rarely go to the movies. We have a little mountain cabin up near Elijah, Georgia; I'm a wood worker, I like to go out in my shop and build furniture when I want some relaxation. I built all the furniture in the mountain cabin.

When we're up there, we watch, on VCR, some movies, but rarely at home. I like *Casablanca*, I guess, or *Gone With The Wind* would be a close comparison.

Rosalynn doesn't like the violent and the war movies, I don't like them much, either; I like a good Western movie. Something you don't have to think too much about.

When we were up in the mountain cabin over the summer, finishing up a book which was just sold, Rosalynn had a birthday. Chip and Ginger, our middle son and his wife, gave her twenty-five movies, so we went on a movie binge for awhile.

We run a lot, we play tennis; we just took up downhill skiing this past winter, which we are going to pursue the rest of our active lives. We played tennis last night; ran yesterday morning. We're very active in that sense.

We have a lot of work to do around the house; we take care of our own farmland and timber. I teach at Emory; as I said, I just finished another book, last week. I *sold* it last week; I finished it a long time ago. This is a book about my outdoor experiences; it's called *An Outdoor Journal*. It's about the things that I do for relaxation, since I was a child: hunting, fishing with my father; hiking in the Himalayas.

(*To our photographer, who's wondering why his flash is not going off*) That thing is not plugged in - does it need to be? ("*That would probably make a difference,*" he says, *in awe of the quick thinking and problem solving demonstrated in a way that only a President could*)

If you were interviewing you, what would be the one humorous question you would ask that we have left out?

I haven't detected any humorous questions yet...

That's your job. I'm not going to think of questions for you.

President Nixon appeared on *Laugh-In*, President Ford was on *Saturday Night Live*, and even Nancy Reagan has been on *Diff'rent Strokes*. Why haven't you done any television?

I haven't been invited.

But if you could appear on any television show, what would it be?

(*Long pause*) I can't answer that, because I don't watch those programs.

No guest shot on *Miami Vice*?

No, I don't watch *Miami Vice*; I don't watch those programs.

No one watches *Miami Vice*.

What would you do, what one crazy thing, if you were sure it wouldn't damage your reputation?

(*He pauses as his eyes light up*) Well, if I could have my fondest hopes, I would refuse to have interviews like this. I don't know; I'm going up in a balloon next month, which won't damage my reputation. Unless I crash.

No fantasies about drag racing President Reagan down Pennsylvania Avenue?

Well, that would damage my reputation.

Not if you won.

I thought you said "*dragging*" him down Pennsylvania Avenue.

What broke up the Beatles?

I think age. I can see the ravages of age in my own life; things break up because of natural competition. My wife and I almost broke up, a year or so ago. We have been married forty years; we started writing a book together, as co-authors, and, honestly, without exaggeration, it really endangered our marriage.

I think that intense relationship when you are in a competitive environment, when you're living in the same house, and living the same daily routine, it is a real big strain.

Our marriage survived, and the book is a best seller; I think that's one of the reasons why people break up after a long relationship.

The Allman Brothers are very close to us; Phil Walden, who manages them, managed Otis Redding and so forth, is a very good friend. And we use to meet a lot of his bands, in those days, probably before your time. Those are the kinds of tensions that develop within a close-knit group.

You never appeared on any of their albums? Perhaps on backup vocals?

No, but I've sung a few times with Willie Nelson. When we go to Willie Nelson concerts, he always invites me up onstage to sing in the *finale*. And he very carefully moves the microphone over, closer to him and away from me, so you can see my mouth moving but you can't hear the words. I'm a horrible singer; I am musically afflicted.

Reported By Steve Adelson, Robert J. Binney, Dan Leary, and Richard Levey.



The Reagans and the Carters at the opening of the Carter Presidential Center

Seeing eye-to-eye on everything