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JOHN TIRMAN: Good afternoon. I'm John Tirman. And on behalf of the MIT Center for International Studies, I welcome you to the Starr Forum, where we will be hearing from Kai Bird, who is the author of the recent biography, *The Outlier-- The Unfinished Presidency of Jimmy Carter*.

If you haven't already, please find the Q&A feature on the bottom of your toolbar. This is where you can type in your questions. And we will, I hope, be able to get to a number of questions toward the end of our hour together. In addition, please pay attention to the chat feature also on the bottom of the toolbar, where we will be sending out resource links, such as bios, upcoming events, and other information, including a link and information on purchasing this book, which I certainly recommend.

Now, let me introduce our speaker, Kai Bird, who happens to be an old friend, I'm happy to say. As a biographer of quite renown, he won the Pulitzer Prize with his co-author, Martin Sherman, on their biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer. He's also written about McGeorge and William Bundy, John J. McCloy, Robert Ames, and others. This is a man possessed by the biographer's bug.

And in fact, he is the director of the Leon Levy Center for Biography at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. So it's a great honor to have you here, Kai. And we'll give you a few minutes to tee this up. And then I'll start pelting you with questions. How's that?

KAI BIRD: Sounds like fun. I love the Q&A period always. So I guess I should tell you a little bit about how I came to this book. I've been working on it six years. But I have been thinking about Jimmy Carter since-- well, since his presidency, when I was a young working journalist at *The Nation* magazine and elsewhere.

And then in 1990, after I was finally finishing my first biography-- a massive 800 page tome on John J. McCloy-- I thought about doing Carter. And my editor at *The Nation*, Victor Navasky said, in a very clever way-- he says, well, to explore this subject, what you ought to do is write an essay for *The Nation* on what Jimmy Carter has been doing with his ex-presidency.

And so I went down to Atlanta and interviewed a bunch of people who were working at the newly formed, newly opened Carter Center. And I had a short telephone interview with President Carter himself. And I wrote a very decent cover magazine story for *The Nation* on Jimmy Carter's ex-presidency. And I came away from the experience convinced that I was the wrong guy to do a presidential biography of Carter because I didn't understand the South. And that trip down there convinced me that Georgia was part of some foreign country.

I didn't understand race. I didn't understand religion, Southern Baptists. And they spoke a different language. It was a different culture. And I came back and told my wife, Susan, that if I were to do Jimmy Carter, I thought we'd have to move to Plains, Georgia for a couple of years, and treat it like being a foreign correspondent, and seep into the land and the people, and get to know this foreign entity called Georgia, South Georgia.

Of course, my wife said, under no circumstances was she moving to Plains, Georgia. So I put the project aside. But I was always curious about Carter. And I went on to other books-- the Bundys, and Robert Ames. And of course, J. Robert Oppenheimer that I co-authored with Marty Sherwin who alas just departed us two weeks ago on October 6. He died of lung cancer, which I'm still in mourning for. He was a terrific co-author and a great guy.

And anyway, I went on to other projects. But I always was curious about Carter. And I eventually came back to him in 2014 after I'd finished my biography, *The Good Spy*. And initially, I wanted to do a president. I thought that would be just a cool thing to do. And I'd written about presidents in many of my other books.

And initially, I thought of doing Ronald Reagan. I went out to the Reagan Library for two weeks and plowed through the archives, going box by box and folder by folder, getting more and more depressed because I suddenly realized that what they said about Ronald Reagan was true. He really was just an empty vessel. He worked hard on his speeches, largely giving the same speech again and again. And he kept a small diary, handwritten diary which had all been published.

But there was no give and take in the archives that you could see between Ronald Reagan and his aides in the White House over policy. He was just the guy who was rolled out for his talking points. And he was very effective as a politician on TV, I guess. But as a biographer, I think I would just find him very difficult to write about.

Anyway, so I gave up on Reagan and I came back to the Carter project and went down to the Carter Library and had just the opposite experience because Jimmy Carter famously-- if they remember him at all, they remember his attention to detail. And he wrote a lot of memos and read 200 pages of memos and letters every day.

And you can see him thinking. He writes them in the margins, in his neat little handwriting. And you can see his thought processes going on. And so it was a very rich subject. It was clear that it was going to be a rich subject, in terms of the archives. And so I dove in and spent six years on it. And I got access with Carter, maybe five or six substantive interviews. And then I got to hang out with him socially on numerous occasions and got to know him a little more as a human being.

And I think, for me, it was a surprise because the Jimmy Carter that I had in my mind from when I was a journalist in the 1970s was actually quite different from the Jimmy Carter that I met in the archives, and through interviews, and diaries. He is much more complicated than people think. And it's just a very relevant story. The issues that he was dealing with as a president-- energy, race, religious fundamentalism, climate change, national health care, the Iran Revolution-- all of those issues are things that we are still grappling with.

So we can learn a lot from studying the Carter presidency. It was a presidency that is much more consequential than people remember. He passed a lot of legislation. And he had an enormous number of foreign policy initiatives. And of course, he had some failures, the Iran hostage rescue mission in particular.

And of course, they remember that he did not get reelected, which is why, I think, most Americans if they-- this was 40 years ago now. But most Americans, if they have a memory of Jimmy Carter, it's, well, he's probably a decent guy. We know of his work as an ex-president with the fact that he goes out one week a year with Habitat for Humanity and builds homes for the poor and his work on behalf of the Carter Center monitoring elections around the world, and his human rights work, and his efforts to bring peace to the Syrian Civil War.

He was a model ex-president. But they will quickly say, but then he was a failed president. And I think after reading *The Outlier*, most readers will conclude that that's simply not true. It's a simplification. In fact, he was a very consequential president and actually a model, in many ways, of what a president should be.

So I think, on that note, I'll turn myself over to you. And you can fire away.

JOHN TIRMAN: Thanks, Kai. I want to remind our viewers that you can start writing questions in the Q&A function. And we'll get to them later, I hope. There's so much. This is a very rich book. And there's so much to delve into. But there's one thing that strikes me particularly, partly because my own interest in Iran.

This is something that I didn't really quite realize. And you detail this in such an insightful, analytical way. During the last days of the Shah-- for our younger viewers, the Shah of Iran was a favorite of Nixon and Kissinger. But he was quite repressive of his people at home. It's kind of a long story we won't get into right now. But Jimmy Carter was faced with a very sharp decline in the Shah's reign. That is, he was losing his footing.

And indeed, he finally decided, after massive protests in the streets, to abdicate essentially, to leave Iran, and to leave his last prime minister, Bakhtiar, to perhaps hold off the onslaught, essentially the popular onslaught of Ayatollah Khomeini, who was in Paris in exile at that point, but it was going to return to Iran. So there were these few days that were very tense, I think, for the president and certainly for the Iranians.

It was a time when Carter was actually considering, of all things, a military coup and, at the same time, not really mindful, I guess I would say, of the human rights situation in Iran, wanting to keep Khamenei at bay, but also not really having successfully taken on the human rights issue with the Shah and its government. What do you think happened there? What do you think happened with Carter and his, I think a failure, of nerves actually.

KAI BIRD: Well, it's a very dramatic story, the whole revolution and Carter's handling of it. And I argue in the book basically that Carter was swept along by historical events. There was, I think, no way that he was going to stop the revolution. The revolution came as a surprise to both him and to the entire national security establishment in Washington.

Just months before the autumn of '78 when the revolution really rolled into the streets, the CIA put out an intelligence assessment flatly stating that the Shah's regime was solid and unthreatened by any real political instability. They were completely wrong.

And Carter was the president famously who put human rights at the center of US foreign policy and made it a keystone of our rhetoric and our principles. And yet, of course, also, like any good politician, he was a pragmatist. And he looked at Iran when he assumed office in January of '77 and assumed that the Shah, who had long been identified as an American ally, was going to be there for the rest of his presidency.

But he was embarrassed by what the Shah's internal politics looked like. And on their first meeting, he did take him aside privately and tried to talk to him about liberalization, and human rights, and releasing political prisoners. And the Shah pushed back, saying, oh, those people are communists and dangerous. And we have to deal with them harshly.

That was the occasion famously when Carter and the Shah, on the South Lawn of the White House, were giving their public welcoming speeches. And there were violent demonstrations that turned into violence just blocks away. And the tear gas used to suppress the demonstrators wafted across the South Lawn. And both the Sean and Carter were photographed wiping tears from their eyes. Anyway, it was symbolic of what was to come later.

But you're right. When the revolution was happening and the regime was clearly falling apart, there was-- and I Chronicle this in the book. There was an intense debate inside the Carter administration that basically came down to, well, can we save the Shah? And there were those like the hardliner in the administration, Carter's national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was pushing for option C as they called it, a coup.

And the Secretary of State by contrast, Cy Vance, who was typically regarded as the dove, argued that this was not really in the cards and that there were downsides to attempting a coup. And in any case, the Shah had no stomach for it. But till the end, even as the Shah was leaving, Brzezinski was pushing Carter to consider option C. And it's a dramatic story, where Carter begins to give-- all right, well, let's sieze big-- feel out the Iranian generals. He actually sends an American general out to Tehran to do this, to check out on whether the Iranian military had the backbone to launch a crackdown.

And at the same time, his ambassador in Tehran, William Sullivan, a very crusty, plainspoken ambassador, was making it very clear in his cables back to Washington that it was hopeless, that the Shah was not going to be restored, that the generals were not willing to shoot into the crowds and kill thousands of people. And yet, Brzezinski kept pushing.

And at one point, famously-- there's this anecdote in the book where Brzezinski persuades his Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Newton to get on the phone with Ambassador Sullivan and asks him point blank, well, Zbig wants to know about a coup. Why can't you guys give a green light to the generals for a coup?

And Sullivan shoots back, it's not going to happen and uses a swear word. And Newton expresses astonishment that he would use language like that. And Sullivan replies, well, you want me to say it in Polish? It's like a pointed rebuttal to Brzezinski. He knew that Brzezinski was behind the question.

Anyway, that's a long way to answer your question. But I think Carter was torn and conflicted. And yet, his instincts were always not to use military force. And yet, he hired this national security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was constantly urging him to be tougher and to think about using military force.

JOHN TIRMAN: Yeah, it's very striking, throughout the book really, the part of his presidency that Brzezinski certainly doesn't come off very well in your reckoning. And in fact, I read a review of the book that said you were really carrying water for Cy Vance. And how do you how do you feel about that?

KAI BIRD: I'm very comfortable with my portrait of Zbig. He was a very feisty, difficult man. And everyone around him in the Carter White House was aware of this and often resented his heavy-handed attempts to get Carter to do things that he precisely did not want to do.

At the beginning of the administration, during the transition-- this is a very telling anecdote-- Richard Holbrooke, who had been a rising Young Turk in the foreign policy establishment and had worked on the Carter campaign, advising them on foreign policy-- Carter calls up Holbrooke, and asks him for his advice, and tells them that he's thinking of putting Cy Vance in as Secretary of State and Zbigniew Brzezinski in as national security advisor.

And Holbrooke says after a long pause, knowing that this is not what Jimmy Carter wants to hear-- he says, well, Mr Carter, I think you could have either one. But the two of them together would be very disruptive. And they have two different world views. And this is quite true. Zbigniew Brzezinski looked at the world through these Cold War blinders. He saw the Russians as the enemy, a generational enemy.

He saw them through Polish eyes. He was the son of a Polish diplomat himself. And he just he hated Soviet communism and hated the Russians. And whether it was the horn of Africa, or Cuba, or the Middle East, he was always thinking about those issues in terms of how to make the Russians feel uncomfortable.

Cy Vance had a completely different world view. He was a consummate diplomat. He saw the Soviet Union as a failing empire and not a threatening, aggressive empire. And of course, as we now know, he was right and Zbig was wrong. But Carter thought that he could manage, like FDR or Lincoln, with a team of rivals. And he enjoyed Zbig Brzezinski's presence. He enjoyed arguing with them.

Early in the administration, Carter gets a memo from Zbig who tells him, you need to send a message to the Russians right away by showing them that you're tough and do something militaristic, just a show of force someplace. And Carter writes in the margin in his neat handwriting, like Mayaguez? Referring to the disaster of the Mayaguez rescue military mission off the coast of Cambodia, which was completely unnecessary and led to unnecessary loss of innocent lives and had been a disaster for Henry Kissinger on Gerald Ford's watch.

And so Carter was-- he was very smart. And he was perfectly capable of arguing with Zbig. And he rejected his advice 99% of the time. But he never fired him. And for the life of me, I couldn't figure out why because Zbig gave him a lot of bad advice. And I quote at the end of the book-- and this is in defense of Cy Vance who, after he finally resigned in the wake of the failed helicopter rescue mission in the spring of 1980-- well, Cy Vance, after the defeat of Carter by Ronald Reagan in November of 1980, he's talking to the one Richard Holbrooke again, coming back to the beginning of this anecdote.

And Holbrook records in his diary that he is astonished to hear Cy Vance say that he just couldn't understand why Jimmy Carter had kept Zbigniew Brzezinski around him because he was an evil man. Cy Vance, evil. This is not a man who uses words like that easily. So again, I know I've been criticized in a few of the book reviews for being a little tough on Zbig. But zbig was himself boastful about this.

In one of my interviews with Zbigniew Brzezinski, he made a point of telling me, oh, one day I got into a difficult argument with the president in the Oval Office. And I marched out, came back to my office. And a few minutes later, Carter's personal secretary walks in and very formally offered him an envelope, a green envelope on green stationery, which signifies that this is a handwritten message from the President himself.

And Zbig opens up the envelope. And there's a one page little note from Jimmy Carter saying, don't you know when to stop? And Zbig was telling me this story proudly because he was proud of the fact that he could have a relationship with the president, he thought, where they could argue strongly with each other. That's who he was.

JOHN TIRMAN: Yeah. There's another bitter episode, which I think was quite consequential even to this day. And that is Andrew Young's firing leading to the Palestine Liberation Organization. And again, for our audience, Andrew Young was a civil rights leader very close to the president, was named by Carter to be our ambassador to the United Nations. And well, you can explain what happened there. But again, it strikes me as being a kind of a failure of nerve on Carter's part, especially given what he already knew about the plight of Palestinians.

KAI BIRD: Right. Yeah, well, to provide the context, Carter came in. And over the objections of all his foreign policy advisors, he announced that he was going to make, as a foreign policy priority, an attempt to get peace in the Middle East between the Israelis, and Arabs, and Palestinians. And he had appointed-- he appointed Andy Young to the United Nations post, knowing that young was going to be an outspoken advocate of human rights.

And Carter made an initiative in the spring of '77, talking for the first time for a president. He talked about the need for a Palestinian Homeland. And this, of course, was extremely controversial. Anyway, move ahead to August of 1979. Andy Young, as UN ambassador, has a meeting that's under the radar. There are some legitimate reasons for why he would hold such a meeting with a representative of the PLO in the home of the Kuwaiti ambassador.

And someone leaks this information, the fact that this meeting took place. And it, of course, officially violates the promise that Henry Kissinger made many years earlier to the Israelis that we would never talk to an official of the PLO until the PLO recognized the legitimacy of the state of Israel.

Anyway, the fact of this meeting was leaked. And it gets a little complicated. But Cy Vance, incorrectly in my view, was given information that indicated that Andy Young had lied to Tony Lake, one of his top aides in the State Department, about the meeting. And in fact, he hadn't lied. He had just not told the whole truth. He'd given a cover story.

In any case, Cy Vance got it into his head that Young had lied. And therefore, he had to go. And he went to Carter and demanded Young's resignation. Carter was, again, extremely conflicted about this. He deeply admired Andy Young. But he thought that if Young had indeed lied to Tony Lake and, by one step removed, to Cy Vance that, well, maybe he had to go. And young himself volunteered to resign.

Carter, years later, said that he thought this was a mistake. He shouldn't have accepted the resignation. He should have stood by Young. And in my accounting of the whole event, which was a real turning point in Jewish and Black relations in this country-- in my account, again, I have to confess I blame Brezezinski. I think he was the guy who leaked the information. He got an FBI wiretap transcript of the fact that the meeting had taken place in the Kuwaiti ambassador's home. And I think he was the one who leaked it because he wanted to get rid of Andy Young. And it was, again, an episode that Carter had real regrets about.

JOHN TIRMAN: Did he want to get rid of Young for policy reasons or something else?

KAI BIRD: Yeah, Young was off the territory reservation, in terms of human rights. He was very outspoken. And in the eyes of Brzezinski in particular, Young was simply not enough of a Cold Warrior, had too rosy a view of the Soviet Union, and was too much of a liberal.

JOHN TIRMAN: Yeah. Turning for a moment to the Cold War and the Soviets, this was a period that was depicted, at the time, as an end of detente, the collapse of detente, even before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan [INAUDIBLE]. What do you think?

How do you think the Soviets regarded Carter? It started out with this very, as you detail, somewhat idealistic offer from Carter to cut the strategic nuclear arsenals dramatically, sometimes described as a clumsy process on his part, but nevertheless sincere. The Soviets recoiled at this. Why did they recoil? And did it have anything to do with Carter's raising of human rights as the banner of American foreign policy?

KAI BIRD: Yes, certainly, it did. At the same time that Carter was making an initiative to, as you said, cut dramatically the number of strategic nuclear weapons, he wanted to negotiate a SALT II treaty that had already been negotiated by his predecessor, Henry Kissinger. And they'd agreed to certain limits. And Carter wanted them to go down even lower, to have fewer weapons.

And he proposed this to the Soviets. And their reaction was, well, wait a minute, we've already negotiated this treaty. Why are you suddenly making new demands? That was point one. And point two, at the same time Carter was talking about human rights. And he was talking about Sakharov. And he was making this, human rights, a public diplomacy pressure point on the Soviet Empire.

And the old, old line, comrades in the Kremlin in those years, led by Brezhnev, were horrified by this. And so they pushed back. And so the result was that the negotiations over SALT II dragged on, and on, and on until finally they got the makings of a treaty. And then it never got ratified by the Senate because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

And again, in my book, it's really interesting. Carter's instincts are all quite liberal. His instinct is to agree with Cy Vance, that the Soviet Empire is a defensive empire, a weak empire, that it's crumbling, that it doesn't work economically, in any way efficiently, and that they're not a threat to us. He was the guy who, early in his administration, used the phrase, we're going to drop our inordinate fear of communism, our inordinate fear of communism, which has been an albatross around our neck, forcing us to support right wing dictatorships just because of our inordinate fear of communism.

Well, that's Jimmy Carter. It's not Zbigniew Brzezinski. Brzezinski was horrified by that phrase. But then they disagreed all the time about the nature of the Soviet threat. And then suddenly, the Soviets invade Afghanistan. And Carter was personally shocked by this. And I argue wrongly so. He should have known that it was coming. The intelligence was showing.

And rationally, he should have looked at the situation and realized that actually the Soviets were invading Afghanistan to overthrow a hard line Communist Party dictatorship in favor of a more moderate Communist Party faction because the guy in power was killing hundreds of people-- leftist and rightist, leftists and religious fundamentalists-- and alienating everyone.

Anyway, the invasion was also-- well, Carter's reaction to it, I think, was overblown. But from that moment on, Brzezinski had Carter's ear. And Vance's influence was on the wane. And this is actually why he resigns in April of 1980, because he can see that Brzezinski has won out in this power struggle.

JOHN TIRMAN: One last question for me, and it can be a quick response. But I was so struck by the opening of the book and Carter's childhood that I can't think of another president in the 20th century who had this hardscrabble childhood, in the sense that they didn't have electricity, they didn't have running water, even though they weren't poor. But it was just, I guess, the way things were in South Georgia. But how did that-- how do you think that influenced him over time it's such an unusual upbringing compared with the Bushes, and the Kennedys, and all the rest of them.

KAI BIRD: No, the great mystery about Jimmy Carter is how he could have come from where he came from in South Georgia, not even Plains, which was population 650 people or so. He grew up in a little hamlet two miles down the road called Archery. And he was virtually the only little white boy in this hamlet. All his friends were African Americans. For half the year, they marched around the farm barefoot. He, well, picked cotton, and he fished, and he hung out in the barnyard with an African American foreman was the only salaried employee.

Their circumstances-- they were well off white people. But their circumstances were certainly Spartan. I mean, he lived in a Sears and Roebuck assembled house, a little three bedroom wooden house that had no running water, no electricity. There was an outhouse in the backyard. I think they got electricity-- and that was a big event in Jimmy Carter's life-- when he was about 14 years of age.

And again, his father-- Carter grew up with African American friends that he went fishing with and sat in the pews in Sunday's church singing African American hymns. He was very comfortable around Blacks throughout his life. And yet, his father was a white supremacist. He believed in segregation. He believed in the supremacy of the white race.

And so this is the mystery. How did Jimmy Carter come out as a liberal in South Georgia? Well, it's all because of his mom, quite evidently, Ms. Lillian, who was from another southern tradition, this tradition of eccentric, gentle-woman southern ladies who got away with breaking all the social taboos. She liked to shock her neighbors by admiring things about Abraham Lincoln, which was a no-no in South Georgia.

And she believed in the equality of the races. And she was a nurse who administered medicine and health care to African Americans in South Georgia. And she gave Jimmy a love of books and a searing ambition. And he was just very bright, and made his way out of this world, and was determined to make his mark on it.

And he was religious, but ambitious like crazy to win political power. And he knew exactly what was necessary to do so. It's a fabulous Shakespearean story that this man comes from Archery, Georgia and becomes president of the United States in 1977. It's just a most improbable story.

JOHN TIRMAN: Yeah, it's a great story. Let me go to questions from our audience. The first one is-- in the latter stages of Carter's presidency, inflation was rampant in the United States. To what extent that the adverse economic situation rather than foreign policy failures prevent his re-election?

KAI BIRD: Yes. Well, as Bill Clinton famously said, it's all about the economy, stupid, right? And it always is. And presidents can get away with doing a lot in the field of foreign policy. Carter had enormous achievements-- the Camp David Peace Accords that led to an Arab-Israeli peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. But on the issue of domestic affairs, where again he got an awful lot done-- he deregulated the airline industry. He deregulated trucking, natural gas. Even the boutique beer industry that we see all over the country today can be traced back to Carter's deregulation policies that favored consumers.

But he became president in the early '77 in the wake of the great energy oil price hikes of the early '70s. And he was concerned about the environment, and energy independence, and our dependence on Saudi and Iranian oil. And he also believed that inflation, which had been jumpstarted by these oil price hikes, was a threat to working class and middle class Americans.

So in a period where suddenly we were faced with stagflation, both an economy that was not employing as many people as we would wish and high inflation, Carter tried very hard to go after inflation. And finally, in great frustration, and against the advice of his political advisors, he appointed Paul Volcker to head the Fed. And he did so in the summer of '79, knowing that Volcker was going to rack up interest rates, and restrict the money supply, and make the economy scream because interest rates and inflation were just phenomenal. Some interest rates went up to like 18% in those years.

So he thought that Volcker's harsh medicine was necessary, although it was going to be extremely politically damaging. So your questioner is right. He faced economic hurdles that really cost him an enormous amount politically.

JOHN TIRMAN: A couple of questions here that are similar-- what do you think is Carter's greatest legacy as president?

KAI BIRD: Well, I certainly think Camp David and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty is a remarkable event, partly because it never would have happened without the personal diplomacy of one Jimmy Carter. I mean, to bring Menachem Begin of Israel and Egypt's Anwar Sadat together for 13 days at Camp David, that produced something that just never would have happened otherwise.

And it almost didn't happen even so. I mean, there were numerous times when either Sadat or Begin were trying to walk out. And Carter just found a way to keep them there. So I think that treaty-- and it's a cold peace. But it has survived all these years. And Egypt is no longer at war with Israel.

But it's also a bittersweet thing because Carter believed he also had, one, an agreement that would lead to solving the Palestinian problem as well. And specifically, he thought that he had gotten Menachem Begin to agree to a five year freeze on all settlement activities in the West Bank.

Begin hotly disputed this very soon after the Camp David Accords. But Carter always believed that he had gotten this promise from Begin. And he believes to this day that Begin either lied to him, or deceived him, or backtracked in a dishonest way from what had been agreed to.

So this explains why we're still living with the Palestinian-Israeli problem that we have today, where the settlements have exploded into the now 700,000 settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. And so Carter is still very obsessed and disappointed by what has happened.

But nevertheless, that was an enormous foreign policy achievement. I would also argue that his deregulation of the economy to benefit consumers really transformed America. It allowed for in the airline industry. It allowed for working class and middle class Americans to fly on a regular basis. It lowered prices and broke up the big monopolies had existed in the airline industry and transformed the way we Americans travel and work.

Also, oddly enough, he was the first president to really begin talking about the environment and the climate change. They didn't use that phrase at the time, but that's what they were talking about. And so he was looking very prescient in that way. Finally, I think the human rights foreign policy initiatives, they still are in place. And if you look back at the collapse of the Soviet Empire and the end of the Cold War, I think it's quite clear that Carter's human rights initiatives were the ideas that helped to really weaken the cement around the walls around the Soviet Empire leading to what happened with solidarity in Poland and the Czech human rights revolution.

This was all started by Carter. And so ironically, the collapse of the Soviet Empire came about not because of Ronald Reagan's defense spending on Star Wars and such, but it came about because of human rights. So again, this is very consequential.

JOHN TIRMAN: It is. And could you talk about Ted Kennedy's challenge to Carter in 1980 and how it impacted Carter's relationship with Congress?

KAI BIRD:

Well, this is personally embarrassing to me because, as a young man in my 20s, I thought Jimmy Carter was not liberal enough. And I think many of my friends and journalistic scribes at the time had the same view. And we pined for Ted Kennedy.

But you go into the archives and you interview enough people, you sometimes learn something. And I learned that Ted Kennedy, really by challenging a sitting president, he greatly weakened Jimmy Carter, making him more vulnerable to the challenge from Ronald Reagan. And the issue that he ran on was national health care.

And yet, it's very clear to me from the narrative that Jimmy Carter wanted to have national health care, too. He campaigned on it in '76. And then he got into office. And he's a small town fiscal conservative. And he looked at the numbers. And he thought, hey, Ted Kennedy can't get the votes for his bigger health care package. And it's too expensive.

And so he brought Kennedy into the Oval Office. And they had a real argument falling out, where Carter says, I want to offer a compromise bill that will give Americans universal catastrophic health insurance so that no American family would spend more than \$5,000 on a catastrophic health event.

And this, of course, if it had been passed and if Kennedy had come aboard on this compromise, they would have had the votes. It wouldn't have been that expensive. And it would have been a foot in the door for the eventual expansion of Medicare or the introduction of a single payer system.

But instead, Kennedy flatly refused to compromise. Carter stubbornly believed that Kennedy was walking out of these negotiations simply because he wanted an issue to campaign on and that he was a privileged Kennedy who thought that the presidency was his by inheritance because of what had happened is to elder brothers.

And Carter just wouldn't have it. He announced that he was going to whip Ted Kennedy's ass and he did in the primaries. Carter could be politically very ruthless. And he knew what it would take to defeat a Kennedy challenge. And he did it. But Kennedy never stubbornly refused to drop out, even when the delegate mess made it clear that he had no chance of getting the nomination.

And right up until the convention, Kennedy was up there. And he even refused to do the famous shaking of hands in the air. And this weakened Carter's base, divided the Democratic Party, and was a major reason, I think, for why he failed to get reelected, along with the hostage crisis and, I would argue, Bill Casey, Reagan's campaign manager, who I believe-- and I have the smoking gun memo that supports this notion.

I believe Bill Casey, as the campaign manager in the summer of 1980, made a secret trip to Madrid, Spain and met with representatives of the Ayatollah Khomeini, promising him that he would get a better deal from his candidate, Ronald Reagan, than he was going to get from Jimmy Carter. And of course, this prolonged the hostage crisis. And I have a short but, I think, quite convincing chapter in the book that documents this October surprise scandal.

JOHN TIRMAN:

Speaking of the Kennedys, I was struck by a number of anecdotes you had about how poorly received the Carters were in Washington by the Washington elite. I remember some of that actually, how unfair it was. Do you think that that was all inside the Beltway gossip and turmoil and that the voters didn't really pay attention to that? Or do you think that actually sifted out into the electorate at large?

KAI BIRD:

I think--

JOHN TIRMAN: Go ahead.

KAI BIRD: Very much. I think the Georgia boys, Jimmy Carter and his Georgia boys, arrived in Washington. And you know Jody Powell, the press Secretary, and Hamilton Jordan, his de facto chief of staff were very young. They were in their early 30s. And they arrived in Washington announcing that the Carter administration owed no one, certainly not the Washington establishment, or the Georgetown set, or the foreign policy establishment.

They had won this campaign as independents, as populists. They weren't bought and paid for by any establishment. And they advertised this. Well, they were also Southerners who had a little-- they had some insecurities about being the first Southerners to occupy the White House.

And in response, the *Washington Post* in particular, but the press in general, they couldn't figure out what to make of these Georgia boys. They were breaking some of the social taboos, wearing work boots into the Oval Office. And so pretty soon, Sally Quinn, a terrific writer for the new style section of the *Washington Post*, a very gossipy feature a feature writer, began making fun of the Georgia boys and published one profile after another that went after them.

And these stories spilled out into beyond the Beltway. And you remember at one point in August of '79, the *Washington Post* put a headline on the front page of the *Washington Post*, "Killer rabbit attacks president." And a lot of people, this is the only thing that they remember about Jimmy Carter to this day, the killer rabbit episode, which was a silly little story about how Carter was in a rowboat in his pond near his house in Plains fishing one day alone.

And a swamp rabbit actually jumped into the pond and swam towards the boat, being chased by dogs. And Carter took his oar and slapped the water to turn the swamp rabbit away. And then he told this story to Jody Powell a few weeks later. And Jody Powell told it to an AP story editor. And suddenly, it got on the wire. And it must have been a very slow news day. But the *Washington Post* put it on the front page of the *Washington Post*.

And it became a sort of-- initially, it was a joke. But it became a metaphor for our hapless president. And it greatly, I think, had a consequence. It greatly weakened him politically. And it fed this narrative that these Georgia boys were country bumpkins from the South who didn't know what they were doing, didn't know the ways of Washington, were incompetent. And it wasn't true. They were actually quite intelligent, savvy, political operatives. And Carter was an extremely hardworking, intelligent president. I think the *Washington Post* has a great deal to own up to for its coverage of the Carter administration.

JOHN TIRMAN: Kai Bird, thank you so much. We're at the end of our hour. I want to urge our viewers to buy this book and read it. There's so much in it. If you're a history buff, it is filled with wonderful anecdotes and analyses that, as you say, are relevant to this day, so many of these issues, still 40 years later. So thank you so much. And to our audience, thank you. Thank you for your patience and your questions. And we'll see you next time.

KAI BIRD: Thank you, John.

JOHN TIRMAN: Bye-bye.

[MUSIC PLAYING]