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JIMMY CARTER INTERVIEW
THE SOUL OF AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Jimmy Carter
Former President of the United States
June 28, 2019
Interviewed by Jon Meacham
Total Running Time: 1 hour

START TC: 01:00:00:00

JON MEACHAM:

Mr. President, when you think about the American soul, the American character, what do you think the best parts of us are and the worst?

JIMMY CARTER:

Well, the best parts are when we treat people as equals and I would say that equality of treatment of people is the foundation for the universal declaration of human rights. And between African Americans and white people, between men and women, between the downtrodden and those who have everything. And one of the essences of human rights is that if there's an obvious disparity between opportunities for people, it's to make everybody have basically the same opportunity for advancement. You know, good education, healthcare, things of that kind. So, I think equality would be the one word that I would use to describe it.

JON MEACHAM:

And the worst?

01:00:54:04

JIMMY CARTER:

Inequality. Well, we start thinking that white people are better than black or men are better than women, or that people like me who came over—whose ancestors came over here a long time ago and people who are just trying to become citizens. If they think that we are different under the law, the treatment they get, I think that inequality is the worst thing about our country when it happens and it's happened a lot lately.

JON MEACHAM:

Well you grew up in a segregated region. You were governor—you were in the military when President Truman integrated it. You were governor—I think you hung Dr. King in the state capitol.

JIMMY CARTER:

By the way, I hung his portrait.

JON MEACHAM:

Portrait. (Laughs) His portrait. What—are there lessons we can learn today from the civil rights struggle in the south?

01:01:54:07

JIMMY CARTER:

Well in many ways I was very fortunate as a future presidential candidate because I lived in a community that had about 55 farm families. My father was the only white one and his family, so I grew up completely surrounded by African Americans. So the culture that trained me both day and night were African Americans and all my playmates were black kids. And my mother was a registered nurse and she was gone a lot, nursing in the community. And so even African American women, you know, taught me the basic rudiments of society and the proper way to act towards other people. So I was very lucky about that and as you said, I was in the submarine force, I was in a submarine when Harry Truman ordained as commander and chief that the end of racial discrimination had come in the armed services and the civil service and so forth. So I was very lucky to see the ravages of racial discrimination when it was very heavily imposed in the community where I lived and also to see the ease of change when Harry Truman ordained that it be brought about on ships and the army.

JON MEACHAM:

Interesting, interesting. Is there a moment when you were president where you believe that we were—you think back and you think you know, that was the country at her best, that's where we were supposed to be?

01:03:36:14

JIMMY CARTER:

Well, when I was inaugurated, I said that we wanted to promote human rights and keep our country at peace and we were lucky enough to do both. I didn't—I wasn't 100% on human rights, but I did keep the country at peace for four years. And I would say the most vivid example of a success of our human rights policy was in Latin America. Because when Fritz Mondale and I became the first two families in the country after the election of '76, almost every country in Latin America—in South America was a military dictatorship. And within five or six years later after we initiated our human rights policy... and being in bed with the military dictators, every country in South America was a pure democracy. And of course, there are different forms of democracy but I think that's the biggest intangible proof of the effectiveness of our human rights policy.

JON MEACHAM:

How worried are you about the issues that you care most about today given the where the presidency is, given the rise of authoritarian and nationalism around the world?

01:04:53:20

JIMMY CARTER:

Well after 9/11, the United States kind of abandoned a lot of its human rights commitments. We disavowed the Geneva Convention about torture of prisoners and we have a change of animosity towards Muslims. And I think in general our country went downhill in the observance of civil rights. When I was president, we were... had a general feeling that we had been successful in eliminating the racial stigma of ancient slavery. For about a hundred years, we had still maintained separate but equal so called. It wasn't separate, it wasn't equal. But anyway, I think that when I was president and saw this, I— it was obvious to me that we needed to be, to persevere in that effort. But since then I think on a global basis, there's been a downward trend in the honoring of human rights principles. The evolution of a universal declaration of human rights which was consummated in about 1948 was the only time in the history of human beings when leaders got together, you might say representatives of the entire world and extracted from the great religions the essence of moral and ethical commitments, treating your neighbor as yourself and other things that are... and we put those into 30 very simple paragraphs, almost all of which are designed for the government to treat its inhabitants as...

JON MEACHAM:

Sovereign.

JIMMY CARTER:

Sovereignty. To treat all those under sovereignty as equals and that's been the essence of that move. And we need to get back to the universal declaration of human rights and supplemented by the Geneva Conventions on the treatment of people in prison and that sort of thing, and also the privacy of individual citizens in America. We abandoned some of those basic principles, you know, I can think justifiably in some ways after 9/11.

JON MEACHAM:

You look at the border now, you look at the way we've been treating people crossing the border in the south, what would you, what's your reaction to those images you're seeing, to the basic, the presidential view at this point that we have to build a wall and not open a door?

01:07:53:10

JIMMY CARTER:

Well, it's horrific. The consequences of it, the new policy, the very rigid policies that President Trump has initiated by executive order and commands his subordinates the separation of children from their own parents, the kidnapping of those children and sometimes awarding them to different parents in this country. The mistreatment of those in detention camps where children are not given soap to bathe with or clean clothes or

something to sleep in or even toothpaste is horrific—horrifying to realize that that’s part of a government and the reputation around the world of the moral values of America. That’s not our country and I hope we’ll see a change in it very soon.

JON MEACHAM:

How do you do that, how do you make that change? How do you listen to the better angels?

01:08:52:08

JIMMY CARTER:

Well I happen to be a democrat and I think obviously to get rid of President Trump and his supporters, I think, who many republicans who don’t really agree with his policies but because of partisan politics they are afraid of him and the consequences of going against him but to elect an enlightened democrat. And we have right now 24 of them competing for that job. We don’t know which ones gonna be elected, but I don’t have any doubt that the next president will be a democrat and be the kind of person who will be committed to basic human rights including equality of treatment of people in the world.

JON MEACHAM:

Mr. President, thank you.