



Jimmy Carter was a great man who should be emulated

By Jeffery M. Leving

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In January of 2000, I wrote to President Jimmy Carter to ask if he would mediate the Elian Gonzalez case.

In case you were too young or just do not remember, Elian Gonzalez was a young boy from Cuba who was in the middle of an international custody dispute. His parents were divorced and in November of 1999, when Elian was only 6 years old, his mother and her boyfriend took him to the United States with a small group that fled Cuba by boat. During the journey, Elian's mother, along with many of the passengers, drowned. Elian was found floating on an inner tube and rescued by two fishermen, who turned him over to the U.S. Coast Guard.

Elian was granted temporary permission by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to stay in the U.S. and was placed with his great uncle, who lived in Miami and wanted the boy to stay in the U.S. Elian's father, who never gave permission for his son to leave Cuba, wanted the boy to return to Cuba.



President Jimmy Carter

After a high-profile custody battle that went on until June of 2000, Elian was returned to his father in Cuba.

During the ordeal, I served as the lead attorney who had an Amicus Curiae brief filed with the INS recommending the child's return to his father in Cuba.

Around the same time, I reached out to then former President Carter because of his international reputation as a humanitarian and believed he could get everyone focused on what was in the best interest of Elian.

In response, President Carter sent me a hand-written response supporting my position, writing that "I am totally and publicly in favor of the boy being returned to his father."

Needless to say, I was pleased that he shared my position but hardly surprised as he was a man of honor.

I thought of this exchange when I heard the sad news that he had passed at the age of 100. I was sad that he died and also sad that there are not many politicians who have the same grace, and compassion.

Jimmy Carter may have been a one-term president and some historians seem to rank his administration as less than stellar. However, his true legacy includes the good work he and his wife Rosalynn did after he left the White House.

That said, President Carter did achieve some great things while in office. Perhaps his most notable achievement as President was the Camp David Accords which were a pair of agreements between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin in 1978. Fighting between Israel and the Arab countries was

common — but the accords led to a peace treaty. Because of the agreements, Sadat and Begin received the 1978 Nobel Peace Prize.

In 2002, years after he left the White House, Carter was awarded his own Nobel Peace Prize for “decades of untiring effort to find peaceful solutions to international conflicts, to advance democracy and human rights, and to promote economic and social development.”

Simply put, Carter’s efforts with the Camp David Accords was only the start of his good work. Once he left office, he and his wife Rosalynn established The Carter Center, which monitored international elections and promoted public health across the world. The Carters were also heavily involved in the Habitat for Humanity, building and repairing homes in multiple countries while raising awareness of the need for affordable housing.

There simply is not enough room in this piece to list all the good that Jimmy Carter did, but one thing seems certain. A lot of the problems that President Carter addressed or mediated have returned — wars in the Middle East, an influx of refugees and asylum seekers worldwide and the lack of affordable housing are back on the front page in many countries. Here’s to hoping our leaders of today both in America and abroad can channel their inner Jimmy Carter and help the world find peace and decency.

Attorney Jeffery M. Leving is the recipient of President Biden’s Lifetime Achievement Award. Leving also served on President Obama’s National Finance Committee and has written three acclaimed books: “Fathers’ Rights,” “Divorce Wars” and “How to be a Good Divorced Dad.” Follow Jeffery M. Leving on Facebook, Instagram and X @DadsRights.