

Interview with Jimmy Carter
Larry King Live (Transcript)
April 28, 2008

LARRY KING, HOST: Tonight, Jimmy Carter. His controversial Mideast peace efforts draws slams from the Bush administration and Israel -- and a shout-out from the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JEREMIAH WRIGHT, BARACK OBAMA'S FORMER PASTOR: The same thing now that President Carter is being vilified for.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: What drives him to go where no former president has ever gone before?

And if he can't broker peace overseas, can he help the Obama and the Clinton campaign forces stop fighting here?

As he made his presidential pick, Jimmy Carter standing up, speaking out.

And then, Barack Obama's former pastor preaches his point of view, but not in church.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

WRIGHT: I served six years in the military.

Does that make me patriotic?

How many years did Cheney serve?

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: Does more talk from Reverend Wright mean more trouble for a divided Democratic Party?

It's all next on LARRY KING LIVE.

We've got a terrific book from the 39th president of the United States, this one "A Remarkable Mother". It's published by Simon & Schuster. And there you see its cover. I'll be talking to the president about his wonderful mother in a little while.

But, of course, some thoughts are -- bear discussion right off the top.

What do you see as the impact of Reverend Wright on this presidential campaign?

JIMMY CARTER, FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Transient. I don't think it's going to be anything permanent or damaging. I grew up in Plains, Georgia. And we have 600 people and 11 churches. And the largest and most powerful church is the Lebanon Baptist Church, which is an African-American Baptist Church. So I've heard this kind of preaching all my life. And we visited in their church and they'd come and see mine.

So I think that what he's teaching, really, is a liberation theology and his origins and his present, I think, the sermons are still shaped by the deprivation of racial discrimination that our country has felt for almost a hundred years after the Civil War.

KING: If that were your church, would you leave it?

CARTER: No, I wouldn't leave it. No, I think not. In fact, I think the church -- with which I'm not familiar -- has a good number of white members. It's a mixed racial church. And he preaches the type of sermon that I think appeals to many people. I think that, also, I've seen a complete sermon of one of those where they took the excerpts. And if you look at the whole sermon and then you see the excerpt, you see that it is quite anomalous compared to the rest of the sermon.

KING: Is race still a big story in this country?

CARTER: I'm afraid so. I think the Republicans have done well in the South based on the race issue, unfortunately. I don't mean they're all racist. I'm not saying that. But ever since Barry Goldwater ran against Lyndon Johnson in 1964 -- when my mother, by the way, was a campaign manager for Johnson. she was one of the few white folks for Johnson back in those days.

KING: In the South?

CARTER: In the South and in our county. And he didn't carry, as you remember, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi or Louisiana.

KING: Yes.

CARTER: But that's when the Republicans found out that the race issue -- in very subtle ways -- was quite attractive in the South. And, unfortunately, that's been the case ever since.

KING: It still plays, then?

CARTER: It still plays to some degree, but to a much lesser degree than before.

KING: Reverend Wright referenced you earlier today at the National Press Club. He was asked about his relationship with Louis Farrakhan and whether he agrees with most racially divisive views.

And here is part of what he said.

CARTER: Oh, really?

I didn't know that.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

WRIGHT: One of our news channels keeps playing a news clip from 20 years ago, when Lewis said 20 years ago that Zionism -- not Judaism -- was a gutter religion. He was talking about the same thing United Nations Resolutions say, the same thing now that President Carter is being vilified for and Bishop Tutu is being vilified for. And everybody wants to paint me as if I'm anti-Semitic because of what Louis Farrakhan said 20 years ago.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: Now, he's saying you're saying the same thing that Louis Farrakhan is saying about Zionism.

Are you?

CARTER: Of course not. No. I've never been any -- I have never had a breath of thought in my mind as being anti-Semitic. As a matter of fact, the most important single issue in my political life for the last 31 years has been to bring peace to Israel and peace for Israel's neighbors. And that's what I still intend to try to do, in a completely proper way, as long as I'm able.

KING: Are you surprised that he would include you as agreeing with Farrakhan?

CARTER: Oh, I didn't realize that Reverend Wright even knew that I was here. But no, I'm not -- I don't know what -- I don't know the context of it. I'm not (INAUDIBLE).

KING: Do you think he's going to play a part, though?

You say it's transient.

CARTER: I think it is. Yes. I...

KING: You don't think McCain is going to use it against Obama?

CARTER: He might. But I think that's going to be old history by the time the general election comes around. And I also think that the -- that if my mother was alive, she would be quite titillated and excited by the fact that a black man or a white woman might be the next president of the United States. And I think she would also be pulling for both of them to stay in the race as long as they had a chance to win. That's what she would have

done. And I think that by the end of the primary season on June the 3rd, the Democratic Party is going to come back together and support a winner.

KING: Are you ready -- there were hints a couple of weeks ago that you were about to endorse...

CARTER: No. KING: ...Senator Obama.

CARTER: No. I made it...

KING: You're not?

CARTER: No. I made a decision quite a while ago that I wouldn't endorse anybody until after the primary season. So I'm not going to do that.

KING: Well, what about that hint a couple of weeks ago when you seemed to -- you certainly praised Obama?

CARTER: Well, what I said was that all of my grandchildren and all of their spouses, all of my children and all of their spouses were for Obama. And I also said that my town of Plains went for Obama and the State of Georgia went for Obama, but I wasn't going to make any decision until after the primary.

KING: Are you impressed with him?

CARTER: Yes, very much so. I think he's brought a new level of eloquence and inspiration to a lot of people. I think Hillary has also surprised a lot of people with her tenacity and her capability as a formidable candidate. I think at first she was kind of in the shadow of her husband. I think now she's blossomed forth in a very formidable fashion. And if I were she, I would not withdraw until I was defeated. And if I were Obama, I would go to the end, as well.

KING: Are you surprised, though, how rather vicious the campaign has gotten?

CARTER: Well, I don't think it's been vicious. You know, if you really analyze exactly what they've said, I don't think it's out of the -- out of bounds of propriety. Nowadays, the enormous influx of money is tempting to every candidate, whether they're running for Congress or the governorship or mayor or whatever -- to vilify their opponent and try to destroy the character of their opponent. And I don't think that either Hillary or Obama have gone nearly that far.

KING: In a while, we'll talk about the remarkable mother book, Jimmy Carter's latest.

Next, should President Carter be involved with Middle East peace talks?

Vote now at CNN.com/larryking. We want to know what you think. You vote.

We'll be right back.

KING: The book is "A Remarkable Mother." The guest is the 39th president of the United States, Jimmy Carter.

We'll talk about his mother in a little while.

Earlier this month, you met with representatives of Hamas. Both the United States and Israel have condemned that organization as terrorist.

First, do you agree with that designation?

CARTER: Well, I think they do some terrorist acts, for which I condemn them. I was in the little town of Sderot, where they launched missiles -- rudimentary rockets -- into the village. And I condemned that and urged them to stop it.

KING: Why did you meet with them?

CARTER: Because there is no way to have a peace agreement in the Holy Land without Hamas being involved in the final agreement. And since they had been a strong impediment to any progress in the past, I thought maybe I could convince them to be more accommodating.

And so I met with the leaders of Hamas, both from Gaza and also the leaders -- the top leaders in Syria. And I had six proposals to make to them. They considered them very carefully. And finally the Hamas leaders in Gaza came to Syria and met with the leaders there in Damascus. And they spent all day Saturday and all Sunday night debating about whether to accept my proposals. And finally they sent me their answers late Sunday night.

KING: Which were?

CARTER: Which were very positive. The first thing I asked them to do was agree to accept Israel's right to exist and live in peace, if there was a peace agreement negotiated between the leaders of the Palestinians, Mahmoud Abbas, and the prime minister of Israel, provided it was submitted to the Palestinians later in a pre-vote -- which the Carter Center would be glad to monitor -- and the Palestinians approved it. So that was one thing.

KING: Did they agree with most of what you said?

CARTER: They agreed completely with it. Yes. And they authorized me...

KING: Did they...

CARTER: ...from the top level to make their announcement to the public.

KING: Did they hesitate later?

CARTER: No, they didn't hesitate later. The leader of Hamas is the president, so-called, of the Politburo. And all of those leaders are considered -- are concentrated in Damascus. And so they're the ones that make the decisions.

There were some spokespersons from Hamas who were unidentified -- I don't even know who they were -- that made some statements to Al Jazeera that Hamas would never accept Israel. But I reconfirmed their commitment with their top leadership. There's no doubt about it.

KING: The head of Hamas is a physicist, you told me?

CARTER: Yes, he's a physicist.

KING: Next in charge is a...

CARTER: A cardiologist.

KING: A cardiologist.

CARTER: He's a medical doctor. Yes.

KING: Though, as a former president...

CARTER: Yes?

KING: ...if your current president -- your current secretary of state says don't go, why not listen?

CARTER: I did listen.

KING: And?

CARTER: They didn't tell me not to go. Nobody told me not to go. Nobody suggested that I not go at all -- ever.

KING: They didn't?

CARTER: Nobody from the State Department or the White House. Never. And so -- the only thing they did was caution one of our advance people that it might be dangerous in Gaza.

KING: That's all?

CARTER: So we didn't go to Gaza.

Right. That's all.

KING: So they cautioned you not to go to Gaza and you listened and didn't go to Gaza?

CARTER: Yes. We didn't go to Gaza.

KING: But you were never told the other?

CARTER: No. Absolutely not.

KING: Did Israel contact you?

CARTER: No. No.

KING: McCain and Obama have addressed your meeting with Hamas on the campaign trail.

Senator McCain went so far as to issue a challenge to Senator Obama.

Watch.

CARTER: OK.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

SEN. JOHN MCCAIN (R), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: He should repudiate President Carter, reprimand him and specifically tell him he should not have that meeting.

SEN. BARACK OBAMA (D), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: You know, it's not my place to discuss who or -- who he shouldn't meet with. I know that I have said consistently that I would not meet with Hamas.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: Reaction?

CARTER: Well, you know, I know the pressures that are on those candidates running for president or Congress or governor or anything else in this country. And I don't blame Senator McCain for making what I consider a very foolish statement, telling Obama to tell me what to do. And I think Obama takes the right up attitude by saying it's not his place to tell me what to do, but if he were -- but he would not go and meet with them. I think it's perfectly rational.

KING: How did you let yourself -- partially with the title of the previous book and the rest...

CARTER: Yes?

KING: ...get in, for want of a better word, such trouble with the Jewish community in the United States?

CARTER: (LAUGHTER)

Well, when I wrote the book about Palestine, not Israel -- "Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid". That's the name of the book, as you know. I was on your program.

It came out in November and in December, I got over 6,000 letters -- 6,100 letters. Seventy-one percent were in favor of the book. And the majority of people who identified themselves as Jewish were also in favor of my writing the book. They said somebody that needs to break the ice and go ahead and get the stalemated peace talks off of dead center.

At that time, when the book came out, for six-and-a-half years, there had been not one single day of peace talks. And there was no debate in this country about the issues that must be addressed.

So that's why I wrote the book. And I don't have any apology to make about the book. It's very fair and it's balanced -- well- balanced.

KING: But now with the Hamas visit, you realize that a lot of Jewish organizations...

CARTER: In this country.

KING: Yes, in this country.

CARTER: Yes. Not in Israel, by the way.

KING: Not in Israel?

CARTER: No, sir. And, as a matter of fact -- and it was published on CNN and also in "The Washington Post." a public opinion poll that was conducted in Israel about a week before I left home. And 64 percent of the Israeli Jews -- they didn't poll the Arabs -- said that they were in favor of full negotiations between Israel and Hamas, because they know the history of it. They know, for instance, that Hamas entered the campaign for the parliament in January of 2006 -- with the full approval, by the way, of the United States and Israel. Hamas won the election. Hamas won the right to lead the government.

KING: Do you know, then, why so many Jews in America are opposed?

CARTER: Because they don't see two sides of the issue and because they don't want to criticize anything that Israel does. And I can certainly understand that motivation.

KING: So you have nothing against Israel?

I want to say (INAUDIBLE)...

CARTER: Absolutely not.

KING: ...go on record here.

CARTER: No. Absolutely not. I think that Israel ought to be more forthcoming. What I think Israel should do -- and I've said it a hundred times -- is to withdraw from Palestinian land and swap land which is Palestinians' for peace...

KING: Well, I think the president...

CARTER: And that's available.

KING: President Bush favors that.

CARTER: He does.

KING: Yes.

CARTER: Unfortunately, the Israeli government doesn't agree with President Bush, as you know.

KING: What does the president think of Clinton and Obama maybe running on the same ticket?

And we'll talk about his wonderful later mother, the subject of "A Remarkable Mother," when we come back.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

KING: Our special guest tonight is Senator Barack Obama.

OBAMA: I feel good going into the convention. There's so much at stake.

MCCAIN: I am who I am to start with, and that is a conservative.

SEN. HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON (D), PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE: His policies are wrong for America.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

KING: A little tooting our own horn there.

(LAUGHTER)

KING: Former President Jimmy Carter.

Can Obama and Clinton be on the same ticket?

CARTER: I think that would be the most unlikely thing that I can imagine. I don't think that either one of them would add very much to the other's ticket.

KING: You don't?

CARTER: No.

KING: OK.

CARTER: What I would like to see is for them to get somebody like Senator Sam Nunn from Georgia, who is an expert on defense matters and who has a, you know, stable and very proven record.

KING: For either one?

CARTER: For either one, yes.

KING: Do you think you could help in bringing them together before Denver?

I suppose -- I mean you don't want it to go to Denver?

CARTER: No, I don't. And I think the election -- and the primary election is going to be over very shortly after June the 3rd, when the last primary is taking. And I think one of them, then, will be clearly ahead. And I and all the other superdelegates ought to go along with that.

KING: Your mother Lillian died in 1983.

CARTER: Yes, that's true. KING: Why a book now?

CARTER: Because I think the country is kind of looking for its own soul or moral values and so forth. And to me, my mother exemplifies or personifies the essence of what America ought to be.

She was a brave woman, she was innovative, she defied customs. I lived in a completely segregated society in Western Plains. I didn't have any white neighbors. My mother never paid any attention to racial segregation, even when the law of the land was separate but equal and the Supreme Court and the Congress approved it.

She started working with poor people. She was a registered nurse. She was their doctor. She ministered to them and never charged them. And then when she was 70 years old, which just shows she continued that, she was in the Peace Corps in India, still ministering

to poor people. She was an "Untouchable" herself, in that she had to handle human fluids and that sort of thing. So she was an "Untouchable." And so that -- she never varied in her commitment to the downtrodden people. She was commitment -- committed to peace, justice, humility, service...

KING: Remarkable is an apt word.

CARTER: I think it is. I tried to think of a lot of adjectives to describe my mama...

KING: Yes, that fits.

CARTER: And she was truly remarkable.

KING: She was a friend of Muhammad Ali's, right?

CARTER: A very close friend. And, yes. In fact, she would -- she campaigned for me five days a week. That's one reason that I won.

(LAUGHTER)

CARTER: We slipped up on all of the other candidates. But she would quit campaigning when Muhammad Ali was fighting a title bout. So one time I remember she went down to New Orleans and watched him win and became champion.

KING: Pancreatic cancer has devastated your family, right?

CARTER: It has.

KING: Who's died, your brother?

CARTER: My father, my brother and both my sisters died of pancreatic cancer. My mother had cancer of the breast. It later moved to her pancreas. So you might say that all of my family died with pancreatic cancer. And there's no other family, by the way, in the world that they've found that ever had four different people die with pancreatic cancer. That would be (INAUDIBLE)...

KING: That's almost a death knell -- you get it, you die, right?

CARTER: If you've got pancreatic cancer, you die. Absolutely.

KING: Because they can't find it early, right?

CARTER: That's true, because it doesn't distort the pancreas. It makes little tiny pimples on the campus of -- on the pancreas and it's not detectable by x-ray and that sort of thing.

KING: Was Lillian an affectionate, loving mother?

CARTER: She really was, when you did as she pleased.

(LAUGHTER)

CARTER: And she was a harsh mama if she -- if you disillusioned her or misled her in any way or if you abused someone she thought ought to be protected, she was extremely condemnatory, harsh.

KING: Did she like her daughter-in-law?

CARTER: Rosiland and mama got along quite well. We were in the Navy and I resigned from the Navy and came home. Rosiland was furious at me because I did that, because she didn't want to go back to Plains and be dominated by my mother, who was quite dominant, and her mother, who was very nice but also inclined to be dominant. So Rosiland was furious.

We drove all the way from Schenectady, New York, where I was building a second submarine for Admiral Rickover, to Plains, 700 miles. Rosiland never spoke to me all the way because she was furious.

But when she got home, she found that she was quite able to run her own affairs, her own family, raise her own children, and, you know, hold my mother at arm's length when she needed to be.

KING: Was Lillian a control freak?

CARTER: No, I don't think so. Mama led more by example than she did by domination. Mama would do something and she'd make sure that we knew about it and then she expected us to emulate her good example.

KING: Do you still preach?

CARTER: Do I still?

I don't ever preach. I teach, yes.

KING: Sunday school, right?

CARTER: Yes. I teach Sunday school every -- the bible classes every Sunday that I'm in church. This Sunday, the bible lesson was from Daniel. And I had about, I guess in our little tiny church, about 600 visitors who came there. I think there were 14 foreign countries represented and a lot of different religions. They come to have me teach. KING: A couple of other things.

CARTER: Yes?

KING: Do you ever think of stop all the traveling and just -- I mean you just were in Nepal or...

CARTER: Like I just (INAUDIBLE).

KING: What -- yes?

CARTER: Well, this is my 25th book. I like to write. And it gives me a chance to express myself and to share my views about my mother with audiences -- a very large audience, just like on LARRY KING.

And I don't feel that the work of the Carter Center is a sacrifice for me. I think it's a -- it's a gratifying thing, from which I get a lot of pleasure.

This past trip, by the way, to the Mideast, was one of the most enjoyable and completely positive trips that we've ever had. We do some adventurous thing and they bring a lot of gratification.

KING: A thought -- do you think you might sit down with some large synagogue or a major Jewish gathering in the United States to express your views?

CARTER: Sure. In fact, I've asked to do that at the synagogue in Atlanta. But I haven't been -- my offer has not been accepted yet. I would be delighted to do that. As you know, I went to Brandeis College, which is a University...

KING: In Waltham, Massachusetts?

CARTER: Yes. And I spoke there to an overwhelmingly Jewish group. And it was a love fest. I mean it was a wonderful thing. That was in -- at the end of my campaign to sell my book about Palestine. It was a wonderful experience. (INAUDIBLE)

KING: Alan Dershowitz was -- did he appear against you there?

CARTER: He came right after me.

KING: Oh.

CARTER: Most of the students left, but he still came and he gave some remarks.

KING: It is always an honor seeing you.

CARTER: It's a pleasure for me, Larry.

Good to be with you again.

KING: Thank you.

"A Remarkable Mother." the book is by Jimmy Carter, the 39th president of the United States.

Reaction...

CARTER: And it's a good Mother's Day present.

KING: Oh, good idea. It comes up in two weeks.

CARTER: All right.

KING: Reaction to the president's comments, Reverend Wright's controversial comments and all the hot political news of the day is ahead.

Stay right there.