

Transcript of Interview with Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter

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BYLINE: Chris Matthews, Chuck Todd, Andrea Mitchell, Tamron Hall, David Shuster, Ed Gordon, Margaret Carlson, Howard Fineman

GUESTS: Pres. Jimmy Carter, Bill Richardson

MATTHEWS: Welcome back to HARDBALL. Former president Jimmy Carter says his family supports Obama. So does that mean the former president will throw his weight behind Barack Obama, as well? Jimmy Carter is here to talk about the presidential campaign, especially Barack Obama, and his new book, called "A Remarkable Mother." It's about your mom.

(CROSSTALK)

JIMMY CARTER, FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: I'm really here to talk about my mother.

MATTHEWS: I know. But we have the news. This is a news program.

(LAUGHTER)

MATTHEWS: And before you -- you have to pay for your supper. First of all, Mr. President, my former boss, with great dignity, what did you make of this fight? Because I know your family supports Barack Obama, but he's in the middle of this storm over his former minister. Has he gotten out of it today by divorcing the guy, basically, from his life?

CARTER: I don't see much of the news, but I think that Obama and Wright ought to be completely separated. From what I hear lately, Wright has really turned on Obama and tried to attack him. His purpose in doing that is indecipherable. And some of the things he said are hard to believe, also. And I think it's very wise of Obama and courageous to separate himself, so far as I can tell, completely from his former pastor.

MATTHEWS: Do you think his pastor will be used by people on the right to play the racial card?

CARTER: I don't have any doubt that they'll use everything they can by the racial card. That's what the Republicans have done, at least in the South, ever since 1964, when Lyndon Johnson ran against -- against Barry Goldwater. And my mother was Lyndon Johnson's campaign -- his campaign leader in Sumter County. So yes, I think they will use everything they can against Obama if he gets...

MATTHEWS: Well, race is not just an issue in the South.

CARTER: It's all over.

MATTHEWS: Coming from Pennsylvania -- it's everywhere.

CARTER: It's all over.

MATTHEWS: But how does he -- how does this guy, this young guy -- he's 46. how does he change history by being able to separate himself from all the differences we have in this country, which are most large at 11:00 o'clock Sunday morning at church?

CARTER: That's true. Still are. And of course, that's about the same age I was. I was 56 when I got out of the White House. And -- but I think that he's handled it extremely well so far. He'll be tested even more severely than in this slight squabbles in the Democratic Party when he faces the general election. And I think he's proven beyond anybody's expectation that he can handle a tough campaign quite well.

MATTHEWS: So you say he's the nominee?

CARTER: No, I don't say anything about that. We've got nine more contests to go, and after June the 3rd, we'll know who has the most delegates, and that's the only thing that counts.

MATTHEWS: So it matters (ph) -- do you believe, in the selection of the next president by your party is the person who wins the most elected delegates?

CARTER: That's what the Democratic and the Republican Party go by is how many delegates you get.

MATTHEWS: So you don't think these superdelegates should be able to overrule that.

CARTER: In an extreme case, yes, I think they have the right to do that. As a matter of fact, the superdelegates were created right after my election in 1980, when the Democratic Party was split down the middle and the Ted Kennedy part of the Democratic wing wouldn't support me. So, that's when they formed the -- the superdelegates.

But I don't have any doubt myself that after June the 3rd when we know the result of the primary that there will be a very quick decision and, in my judgment, both candidates will support the other one if they should lose. And I believe that most of their supporters will also support a Democrat.

MATTHEWS: The Democratic Party never really came back together in 1980, Mr. President.

CARTER: No, it didn't.

MATTHEWS: Because Ted Kennedy wouldn't shake your hand at the platform. And here -- but this -- are you afraid it might happen again, that the Hillary people...

CARTER: No.

MATTHEWS: ... may not come back and back Barack with all they have?

CARTER: I'm not afraid of that. I don't think that will happen at all.

I think Hillary and Bill are two strong Democrats and committed to our party. I think Obama is the same way. So, my judgment is what I have already said, that after the primaries are over and we see who the clear leader is, then the superdelegates will probably go along with that, unless it's an extreme case, and -- and the loser will endorse, and -- and their supporters will support the winner.

I think there may be one exception to that. And that is a lot of the young people, and maybe the African-American people, that have come in for the first time to participate enthusiastically in a campaign may not be enthusiastic if their candidate loses. But that would be the only exception. And that's a minor percentage of the total votes.

MATTHEWS: Do you think there's a propaganda campaign being run against Barack Obama by people who think his name Hussein is a problem?

CARTER: I have heard about that, yes. Well, you know, I think that's a frivolous sort of thing. And, in my judgment...

MATTHEWS: People who say he's a secret Muslim? Thirteen percent of the American people now believe it because of that propaganda.

CARTER: I think they will get over that before the general elections.

MATTHEWS: You do?

CARTER: Yes, sure.

MATTHEWS: OK, let me ask you one question. The pollsters asked in the Gallup poll -- and I will get to your book -- the Gallup poll, they asked about whether you would be proud to have this person as your next president.

What would be your pride, as a world figure, to have Barack Obama as the next president of the United States?

CARTER: If you go to almost any country in the world and see what they feel about the presidential election, the answer would be apparent to you.

I have been, in the last month, I think, in nine different countries, and the number-one item of discussion there is the prospect of Obama being the president. But, of course, the decision is to be made by the American people, not foreigners.

MATTHEWS: How do we get back to a country where your mom would join the Peace Corps?

CARTER: Well, you know...

MATTHEWS: I mean, that spirit, that sense of public service and this sense that we are part of the world; we're not the enemy of the world?

CARTER: I wrote this book because I feel like a lot of people have -- have lost sight of what it really means to be a strong, determined, dedicated American that wants to change things and don't -- and doesn't care what the public thinks.

My mother started off that way when I was a child. I grew up on -- in a community, as you may know, that didn't have any white neighbors. All of our neighbors were African-American. And that was in the depths of the Depression and also the depths of racial discrimination, when blacks were treated like animals, almost.

My mother was a single holdout in the whole community. She treated black and white people the same. And she was condemned for it. And she resisted the condemnation. And she persisted. And I would say she persisted all during her life, because, when she was 70 years old, she was still doing the same thing as a Peace Corps volunteer in India, dealing with untouchables, people who had leprosy and so forth.

And, in effect, she was an untouchable, too, because she was a nurse, and she dealt with bodily fluids and things of that kind.

MATTHEWS: Yes.

CARTER: So, she was scorned by the -- by the high-class people.

But mother persisted in that all the way through. And she did it with a sense of humor. She never thought that she was making a sacrifice when she gave her life to other people. She thought it was a great privilege.

MATTHEWS: Do you think Obama could bring back that spirit that you felt during the '60s? I know you said, when -- and I completely believe you -- when Jack Kennedy was killed, you were crying out at the farm.

CARTER: I was.

MATTHEWS: And that spirit of national service, and being part of the world?

CARTER: I think that either one of the Democratic candidates can do that, because it's going to be such a dramatic change and improvement over what we have done -- what we have seen for this past seven-and-a-half years.

MATTHEWS: Last question. I'm not a foreign policy maven, like you are. I have this sense out there -- and I'm not pro-Syrian or pro-Arab. I'm trying to see peace over there. I'm trying to figure it out.

And -- and all that you have learned over there -- I got a sense that, for some reason, Bashar Assad wants a deal with Israel. Am I right?

CARTER: Absolutely.

MATTHEWS: Why does he want a deal and, at the same time, playing games with the North Koreans with nuclear weapons and all that stuff?

What's his real game here?

CARTER: I'm not sure -- I'm not sure that's true. I mean, nobody has proven that he has nuclear weapons.

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: But what -- what's his game? Does he want peace with Israel? Does he want a real treaty with them, or what?

(CROSSTALK)

CARTER: He wants the Golan Heights back.

MATTHEWS: But will he sign a real treaty with them?

CARTER: Absolutely. He told me that he is eager to do it, starting tomorrow.

And there are only two requirements that he has. One is that the United States be involved, because the United States is blocking Israel, now, from negotiating with him, and also...

MATTHEWS: We are? How can we stop Israel from negotiating with one of its neighbors?

CARTER: I know you're kidding.

MATTHEWS: I'm serious. How can we stop them?

CARTER: Well, the United States has a great influence in Jerusalem, as you -- I'm sure you know.

But, anyway, that's what -- that's what Assad thinks.

I have known Assad since he was a college student, Bashar Assad. I knew him because I used to visit his father.

MATTHEWS: So, you think that Israel -- Israel could have another peaceful neighbor, like Egypt...

CARTER: Absolutely.

MATTHEWS: ... in the near future?

CARTER: Absolutely.

MATTHEWS: And what has to happen for that to happen?

CARTER: Just -- they have already agreed on 85 percent of the aspects of a peace agreement between Israel and -- and Syria.

MATTHEWS: Yes.

CARTER: They have agreed on the geography. They have agreed on international monitoring.

MATTHEWS: Right.

CARTER: They have agreed on the whole thing.

And -- and Assad is just waiting to go back to the negotiating table with Israel. He wants the fact that they are having negotiations to be made public.

MATTHEWS: I know he wants it, but will he recognize the right of the Jewish state to exist?

CARTER: Absolutely.

MATTHEWS: Well, that's a hell of a development, if that happens.

CARTER: He's already done it. I mean...

MATTHEWS: Well...

(CROSSTALK)

CARTER: ... all 22 Arab nations, all their leaders have already agreed three different times.

MATTHEWS: But they set the condition that Israel has to give back Jerusalem, give back all the land of '67.

CARTER: No, just -- just go back to the 1967 border.

MATTHEWS: Yes, well, that's a lot for Israel to give back.

CARTER: Well, it may be hard, but that's...

(CROSSTALK)

MATTHEWS: I mean, it's really hard. I mean, they don't want to have to give away their capital again.

CARTER: Well, that's the Palestinian territory.

MATTHEWS: Well, that's an argument that you can make, Mr. President...

CARTER: That has always -- that has always been...

MATTHEWS: ... but that's not accepted by Israel, is it?

CARTER: That's always been the premise. Is Israel willing to have peace, or would -- do they want Palestinian land?

MATTHEWS: I think -- I was trying to look at a narrow -- I -- I thought a separate peace between Israel and Syria could be done by itself, though, right?

CARTER: Absolutely.

MATTHEWS: They don't have to give back the '67 borders?

CARTER: I don't think they do, no.

MATTHEWS: Well, that's a development.

CARTER: It's just a matter that concerns the Golan Heights, but it goes all the way down to the Sea of Galilee, as you know.

MATTHEWS: Well, as Adlai Stevenson said, the walk of 1,000 miles begins with one step.

Thank you, Mr. President.

CARTER: It's a pleasure.

MATTHEWS: It's always a great thing to have worked for you, sir.

CARTER: Thank you, Chris.

MATTHEWS: Thank you.

Jimmy Carter. The book is "A Remarkable Mother," not a hard sell. Ms. Lillian, we grew up with her. She served in the Peace Corps.

I can tell you, that's pretty impressive for a woman of her age.

Up next: Governor Bill Richardson on Obama, Hillary, and the Reverend Jeremiah Wright -- more on that hot-cooker story when we come back in a minute.

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