

Nancy Mitchell, *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. Xvi + 883 pp. \$45.00 US cloth, ISBN 978-0804793858.



When Nancy Mitchell sat down to interview former President Jimmy Carter as part of her research, she got something truly unexpected: a presidential admission that “we were on the wrong side” of a historical event (15). In her lengthy tome, *Jimmy Carter in Africa: Race and the Cold War*, Mitchell traces Carter’s policies towards Rhodesia and the Horn of Africa during his one-term presidency. In focusing on these two case studies, Mitchell’s purpose is to find out exactly what was President Carter’s foreign policy towards Africa.

For Mitchell, Carter lacked a singular identifiable political ideology, complicating the search for a coherent foreign policy that applied evenly in different areas. He pursued divergent courses in Rhodesia and the Ogaden War, experiencing both success and failure, respectively. In regards to the Rhodesian Civil War, ongoing for a decade when Carter assumed office, the president carefully addressed the conflict as a stated policy goal immediately following his election. The complexity of the war was conducive to Carter’s thoughtful nature: the president could not support the governing white minority due to its oppressive policies, but he also feared sustained Cuban involvement on the side of the nationalist rebels. To thread this needle, Carter brought the guerrillas into the diplomatic process to subvert Cuban influence. While the president’s critics saw “a White House that embraced Marxist terrorists,” Carter managed to transcend the bipolar Cold War tendency by legitimizing the nationalistic Patriotic Front guerrillas as

freedom fighters with grievances (507). What eventually resulted were democratic elections in the newly-christened Zimbabwe.

Carter’s Cold War victory in southern Africa contrasted starkly with the Horn of Africa, which experienced calamity when Somalia attacked Ethiopia, setting off the Ogaden War. Whereas Carter had a pre-planned roadmap for the Rhodesian conflict, Somalia’s sudden offensive caught Carter off guard. His eventual failure stemmed from the “ad hoc and reactive” nature of his response, which was inflexibly tied to the vision of a bipolar world that he had avoided in Rhodesia (6). Carter recognized the strategic Cold War importance of Berbera, a port coveted by the Soviets before Somalia broke with Moscow, and securing Somalia’s position in the American camp required the promise of an arms deal. The Somalis used this promise as a pretext to invade Ethiopia, and Carter was further embarrassed when the Cubans intervened on behalf of the Ethiopians, who had been an enduring ally of the Americans. Complicating diplomatic matters was the dysfunctional partnership America had with British, French, and West German allies, whereas in Rhodesia the United States dealt closely only with Great Britain.

Carter’s lack of ideology often made him a soft target for his critics. With time to map a plan of attack, as in southern Africa, Carter found success, but when he was pressured and forced into a reactive position, he faltered. His pauses created “corrosive suspense” and unease among Americans, the media, and even the US government (655). As a result of this unease, misinformation and leaks could dominate the public narrative and undermine the presidency by framing Carter as weak and indecisive. Among his contemporaries and for his historical memory, argues Mitchell, “feelings trump recollection of facts” (686).

Race is one of the most prominent themes of Jimmy Carter in Africa. For Carter, race and the Cold War were intertwined, and he viewed the Rhodesian Civil War through a Civil Rights lens. Though the two were not directly parallel, the oppression of a black minority and topic of racial injustice naturally lent itself to the discourse in American media and congressional debates. A second underlying theme involves the great pains Mitchell goes to in order to contextualize the historical events. She both places Carter in historical context, such as inheriting a difficult situation from Henry Kissinger in Angola and Rhodesia, and explains the president's behavior through his character and contemporary difficulties. Carter's upbringing, views on race and civil rights, the Vietnam War, and political pressure to "do something" about the Cubans and the Soviets all mix to color Carter's decision-making (446).

Jimmy Carter in Africa is a traditional diplomatic history and frames Carter's struggle as a larger story of Great Powers grappling with the decolonizing Global South. To add depth to the story, Mitchell attempts to read Carter's mentality and character to explain his views on the world and his subsequent actions. Research in archives from the United States, Britain, Germany, South Africa, and Zambia provides Mitchell with a diversity of perspectives on the events, though sources from Somalia, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia were inaccessible. Mitchell rounds these more

traditional diplomatic sources out further with her own interviews of many of those involved, including Carter, the president of Zambia, and National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski.

While many Cold War historians have overlooked Africa in general in favor of Latin America and Asia, Mitchell argues that Africa was the center of attention for the Carter administration, choosing instead to analyze two lesser-known interventions of Carter rather than the Middle East. A second major intervention Mitchell makes is rehabilitating Carter's image. For Mitchell, Carter was not a weak, naïve idealist but a Cold Warrior from the beginning. His idealism and push for "moral restoration" (654) were actually part of the national interest and a realist foreign policy, because rehabilitating America's image would help it pursue its interests. Furthermore, Carter was not caught between Secretary of State Vance and Brzezinski, but he maintained cool control of a united administration.

Jimmy Carter in Africa is the result of exhaustive research, and Mitchell clearly has the talent of a writer's touch. She convincingly argues that Carter's legacy has been oversimplified and in some areas misremembered, but the sheer size, density, and breadth of topics covered in the book may discourage all but the most fervent Cold War enthusiasts from picking it up.

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