

THE SUN

Jimmy Carter wasn't as bad a president as some on the right make him out to be

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February 21, 2023

Jimmy Carter was president long before I was ever born.

Accordingly, Jimmy Carter the home builder stands out more in my impressions of him than anything else. Which to say, I have an overall favorable inclination toward him because he devoted his post-presidential life to helping people.

Yes, I know the history and the overarching narratives about his time as president — stagflation, the hostage crisis in Iran, conservatives considering him one of the worst presidents in the last century, and so on.

But I thought I'd just point out some of his high points as president.

In his first State of the Union address in 1978, he said, “We really need to realize that there is a limit to the role and the function of government,” continuing, “Bit by bit we are chopping down the thicket of unnecessary federal regulations by which government too often interferes in our personal lives and our personal business.”

Can you imagine a Democratic president talking like that these days?

And it wasn't just talk. He took action consistent with that message.

That year, he signed the Airline Deregulation Act to encourage greater competition in the airline industry. What was once a limited and not very competitive market became a more competitive one offering more affordable air travel to Americans.

He also signed into law the Staggers Rail Act, which deregulated the nation's railroad industry, significantly slashing shipping rates.

“By stripping away needless and costly regulation in favor of marketplace forces wherever possible, this act will help assure a strong and healthy future for our nation's railroads,” Carter said.

He did the same for the trucking industry with the Motor Carrier Act, which in the long run helped benefit both workers and consumers by making it easier for providers to enter the market.

“At its best, the Carter legacy was one of workaday reforms that made significant improvements in American life: cheaper travel and cheaper goods for the middle class,” wrote the Cato Institute's Gene Healy in 2010 in a fitting summation of the good Carter did for Americans.

Just as Carter recognized the harms of government overreach on economic matters, Jimmy Carter was also ahead of his time when it came to drug laws.

“President Carter asked Congress today to abolish all Federal criminal penalties for the possession of small amounts of marijuana,” reported the New York Times on Aug. 3, 1977.

“Penalties against possession of a drug should not be more damaging to an individual than the use of the drug itself,” Carter said. As president, Carter advocated for decriminalization, preferring that civil fines be imposed rather than criminal penalties.

If only his calls were heeded. The criminalization of marijuana, the most popular of the still federally illegal drugs, has been the key driver of the extraordinarily expensive and draconian war on drugs.

Millions of arrests have been made for marijuana offenses, mostly for possession, over the decades. Even in 2020, during the coronavirus pandemic and amid broad state-led legalization efforts, authorities managed to make 300,000 arrests across the country for marijuana possession. It’s absurd.

In 2011, Carter penned an op-ed for The New York Times calling for an end to the global war on drugs, writing, “Not only has this excessive punishment destroyed the lives of millions of young people and their families (disproportionately minorities), but it is wreaking havoc on state and local budgets.”

In the op-ed, Carter advocated the recommendations of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, which has called for an end to criminalization of drugs and a greater emphasis on drug treatment and prevention of drug addiction through honest drug education rather than simplistic anti-drug messaging.

About all of this, Jimmy Carter is correct. Unlike many conservatives, he was able to — at times, but not always — recognize overreach of the state into our private affairs could be as harmful as overreach into economic affairs.

Sure, Jimmy Carter wasn’t the greatest of presidents. But he was capable of working across the aisle, recognizing the limits of government action and taking actions that benefit Americans to this day.

For that, he deserves credit and respect.