ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST IN PRESIDENTIAL MEMORY:
JIMMY CARTER AND THE PRESIDENTS OF THE LATE COLD WAR PERIOD

D. Jason Berggren
GEORGIA SOUTHWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract

Jimmy Carter was a different kind of president. While he affirmed the principle of church-state separation, Carter talked about his religion, shared his religious experiences, and applied his religious beliefs in politics to a greater degree than his presidential contemporaries. This was evident in his views toward Israel and the Middle East. To illustrate Carter’s distinct views, a comparative approach is employed using presidential memoirs. In this essay, Carter’s views are compared with his contemporaries, presidents from Lyndon Johnson to George H.W. Bush. Fundamentally, presidents of the late Cold War period offered secular, non-religious reasons for U.S. involvement in the Middle East. They were largely concerned with Soviet designs in the region and the potential for the Arab-Israeli conflict to widen and directly involve the two superpowers. However, Carter also defined U.S. interests in the region from a religious standpoint. Like other evangelicals, Israel and the Middle East for Carter were important because they constituted sacred space, holy land, and working for peace in the Middle East was a “sacred cause.”

Introduction

“The Jewish people are entitled to one place on this earth where they can have their own state on soil given them by God from time immemorial.”

“Let us now reward all the children of Abraham who hunger for a comprehensive peace in the Middle East. Let us now enjoy the adventure of becoming fully human, fully neighbors, even brothers and sisters. We pray God, we pray God together, that these dreams will come true. I believe they will.”

– Jimmy Carter

Since the birth of the Jewish State in 1948, every American president has claimed to be pro-Israel. They have all supported Israel, affirmed their commitment to Israel’s national security, and have supported the right of Jews from other countries to migrate there. They have also supported efforts to bring about peace between Israel and her Arab neighbors. For his part, Jimmy Carter had an unmistakable religious vision and a biblically-inspired sense of mission for Israel and her Arab neighbors, particularly Egypt. He had an evangelical style of presidential leadership and diplomacy. Peace in the

1 The author wishes to acknowledge that this paper was previously presented at the 2008 biannual meeting of the Symposium on Religion and Politics, The Henry Institute, Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan.
Middle East was part of his effort to build a “global community,” to “obey the Biblical injunction to ‘follow after the things which make for peace’.” He took up the issue early on in his presidency and it continued to be an issue of major importance through his four years. But did Carter’s presidential contemporaries of the late Cold War period share his religious view of Israel, Egypt, and the wider region? When they spoke of peace, did they connect it with a sense of religious obligation? The purpose of this essay is to put the views and perceptions of President Carter in comparative perspective. First, using his presidential memoir, Keeping Faith, and some other key sources, Carter’s religious vision of the Middle East is presented. Subsequently, his views and political style is compared with that of the other presidents of the late Cold War period: Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush. The focus here is the individual views and images possessed and projected by the presidents, not the collective views and images of their administrations. Did Carter’s presidential contemporaries share the basic assumptions about Israel and the Middle East that he held? Did they possess a discernible religious perspective toward the region or what might be called an evangelical perspective? To answer these questions, the memoirs of each president from Johnson to Bush were examined and their respective views on Israel and the Middle East described. Other sources were consulted and used for narrative purposes.

**Using Presidential Memoirs**

Presidents want to be understood—and understood on their own terms. They want to control and shape how their presidency is viewed. They want to leave behind a favorable impression and legacy. They seek to influence and enhance their historical reputation. Since George Washington, presidents have used a variety of methods to communicate their ideas to the American people. They “go public” to rally public opinion in their favor, to boost their favorability and job approval scores. From a more popular position, presidents are in a much better position to persuade.

Presidents use written forms of communication to get their message out, others are oral. They engage in personal correspondence, such as writing letters or memoranda. They provide narrowcast messages in person or in writing to select groups or constituencies, including religious ones, as a way of establishing a relationship or building upon an existing one. Use of presidential proclamations is one way in which presidents have accomplished this. To energize supporters and gain new ones, a nomination acceptance

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6 Rosati acknowledged religion as an important influence on Carter’s foreign policy vision. However, he did not discuss it at any length. He noted that Carter was optimistic about what could be done in reimaging and remaking the world. Though his view of things would sour by 1980, with the Iranian hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter remained hopeful about the Middle East conflict. From idealistic optimism to increasing pessimism, other scholars have noted similar changes in Carter’s foreign policy. See David Skidmore, *Reversing Course: Carter’s Foreign Policy, Domestic Politics, and the Failure of Reform* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996); Yael S. Aronoff, “In Like a Lamb, Out Like a Lion: The Political Conversion of Jimmy Carter,” *Political Science Quarterly* 121, no. 3 (2006): 425-449.

7 Rosati, *The Carter Administration’s Quest for Global Community*, 17-19. Rosati’s focus was individual and collective images. He was interested in presenting and examining the individual foreign policy images of President Carter, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Together, they represented the Carter administration’s collective image. Sometimes, there was consensus and other times there was dissensus. His study involved comparisons within an administration. This study focuses only on presidents and involves comparisons between Carter and five other presidents.


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speech given before the party’s national convention is an important act in presidential communications. Presidents inform the voters about what they have done and what they plan on doing. They make their case for another four years. Presidents also give major speeches to the country and the world, including the inaugural address, the farewell address, primetime addresses from the Oval Office, the Rose Garden, or the East Room of the White House, the State of the Union address delivered before the Congress, or an address before the United Nations General Assembly. However, important as they are, these are all examples of communicative acts that take place during one’s presidency. What is of interest here is the one major communicative act that takes place after one’s presidency—the presidential memoir.

Though few presidents in American history have written a memoir about their years as president, each president of the late Cold War period did. In terms of the written record, it is something they all have in common.10 As Ronald Reagan explained at the outset of An American Life, “Presidential memoirs have become somewhat of a tradition recently.”11 George W. Bush said that after meeting with twelve distinguished historians, “To a person, they told me I had an obligation to write. They felt it was important that I record my perspective on the presidency, in my own words.”12 In fact, as in Reagan’s case, the memoir may be a president’s only post-presidential work of significance.

Examination of presidential memoirs is one important means of “getting inside the mind” of a president. It is a book of the president’s memories.13 It is purportedly the president’s view of himself and his record. It is the president’s recollection of what he did as president and why he did it. It is a rendering of history, “a good story,” from the president’s viewpoint.14 It is a “personal account of my presidency.”15 Providing the president’s view of things, Lyndon Johnson asserted, “That is the sole excuse for [the memoir’s] existence.”16 Unlike the other examples of presidential communications mentioned earlier, the memoir is entirely retrospective, not prospective. It is “a great opportunity for reflection.” In the memoir, the view of the White House years is entirely in the rear view. It is “a picture of what it was like to serve as president.”17 At this stage, there may be a lot of “what ifs,” but there are definitely “no do-overs.”18 The memoir is about presidential memory, what the president remembers and what the president wants the country to remember. The memoir is an official act of presidential communication, an authorized work about a presidential life and a presidency.

Admittedly, there are limitations.19 Presidential memoirs may not be the favorite or preferred resource for every scholar. Some find presidential memoirs boring because the president does not say anything new, does not express doubts or admit mistakes. The president is too timid to bare his soul. The president is not candid enough or shows insufficient humility. Others may be turned off from using them

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15 Carter, Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President (Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press, 1995; originally published in 1982), 605.
17 Bush, Decision Points, xi, 476.
or appreciating them because presidents make an extraordinary amount of money from publishing their memoirs. It may be unseemly for presidents to be “cashing in” on their years in public service.\textsuperscript{20}

Then, there is the charge of the memoir not even being written by the president. Even the so-called best presidential memoir, the one hailed by many scholars, \textit{Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant}, may not have been entirely his. Besides, Grant’s memoir was about the Civil War and not about his presidency. Of course, this is an issue for any president. President Washington had help with his communications. Nevertheless, written or ghostwritten, the memoir, like any other presidential writing, is approved by the president. If it has his name on it, he owns the words and assumes the responsibility.

Finally, it is said that the memoir is an incomplete source. Presidents do not put everything in it. The memoir is a matter of selection for the president. As George W. Bush explained, \textit{Decision Points} is “not an exhaustive account of my life or presidency.”\textsuperscript{21} While the memoir is presented as a single presidential source, one should recognize that it is based upon a number of presidential sources. Presidents pick and choose from the mass of material at their disposal when writing the memoir. “Instead of covering every issue,” Bush wrote, “I’ve tried to give the reader a sense of the most consequential decisions that reached my desk.” Some of the material included is being declassified and released to the public for the first time. In \textit{Keeping Faith}, Carter claimed that his memoir was informed by many volumes of private diary notes, personal tape recordings, public papers, and “my own memory.”\textsuperscript{22}

The presidential memoir may have its issues. Academics may complain about them. Nevertheless, it is a prime source for presidential scholarship. Presidents will continue to write them and scholars will read, examine, and use them. Gleaves Whitney of the Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies at Grand Valley State University made this observation about the utility of the memoir.\textsuperscript{23}

Cynicism aside, memoirs are important documents because Americans should know how a president explained the most important decisions he made and how those decisions have affected our country. Memoirs are also valuable because they are among the source materials that historians use to write biographies, construct narratives of an era, compare presidents, analyze change over time, study ideas and institutions, etc.

If sincerely held, such a profound influence as religious faith should be readily evident in a president’s memoir. President Ford said that his memoir provided him the chance to convey some of his “innermost feelings and beliefs” and he was not shy in mentioning that religion was important to him. His memoir begins with a quote from the Bible and a quote from Abraham Lincoln that illustrated the 16\textsuperscript{th} president’s faith and reliance on God.\textsuperscript{24} If President Reagan was correct when he wrote that a presidential memoir is an opportunity for a president “to tell his story in his own words,” the presence or absence of religious motivations and language would be revealing.\textsuperscript{25}

\textbf{Carter’s Religious Vision of the Middle East}

Ever since losing his race for Georgia governor in 1966, religion became for Carter “the driving force” in his political and personal life.\textsuperscript{26} Carter was a born-again evangelical Christian who pledged as president to pursue policies that he believed were compatible with his understanding of the Christian faith. In addition to being from the South and being a Washington outsider, Carter argued that his faith made him a different kind of president, providing him with “a different way of governing.”\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{21} Bush, \textit{Decision Points}, xi.
\textsuperscript{22} Carter, \textit{Keeping Faith}, xiii.
\textsuperscript{24} Ford, \textit{A Time to Heal}, ix-x, 1.
\textsuperscript{25} Reagan, \textit{An American Life}, 7.
Of all the faith-based or inspired policies he advocated, Carter’s search for peace between Israel and her Arab neighbors, particularly Egypt, was perhaps the clearest example. Though he clearly recognized that peace in the Middle East would serve U.S. interests in the region, Carter believed that working for peace in the Middle East was not only good and practical policy, it was more importantly “sacred work,” a “sacred task,” and a “sacred cause.” Finding peace between the Israelis and the Arabs, Carter said, was rooted in “a religious commitment.”

Given the region’s importance to U.S. foreign policy, memoirs should provide us important clues to the Mideast views of the presidents. In his presidential memoir, Keeping Faith, Carter explained that he came to “realize that I spent more of my time working for possible solutions to the riddle of Middle East peace than on any other international problem.” Bringing peace to Israel, specifically, was a constant “on my agenda, and on my mind.” He prayed for it. In the memoir, he wanted his account of Middle East developments told. “I was especially concerned that the peace process in the Middle East be explained.”

Before he mentioned any other reason for supporting Israel and regional peace, such as the shared democratic values between the United States and Israel or his admiration for Israeli military courage and prowess, Carter cited religious justifications. He mentioned that as a Baptist he was taught to believe that it was the Holy Land, a land of Christian pilgrimage, and a place of sacredness for others.

In my affinity for Israel, I shared the sentiment of most other Southern Baptists that the holy places we revered should be preserved and made available for visits by Christians, and that members of other faiths should have the same guaranteed privileges concerning their sacred sites.

Carter then explained that religion was something that can bring together and bind Jews and Christians and that he had believed this throughout his life.

The Judeo-Christian ethic and study of the Bible were bonds between Jews and Christians which had always been part of my life.

Next, he noted that the Holocaust had an impact on his thinking. The Jewish people “deserved their own nation.” Indeed, Carter asserted that the Israel of the twentieth century was a “homeland for the Jews” according to God’s will.

I also believed very deeply that the Jews who had survived the Holocaust deserved their own nation, and that they had a right to live in peace among their neighbors. I considered this homeland for the Jews to be compatible with the teachings of the Bible, hence ordained by God.

“These moral and religious beliefs,” Carter concluded, “made my commitment to the security of Israel unshakable.” Later, he explained that peace in the Middle East, peace between Jew and Muslim, was something he prayed for and hoped that his prayers would someday be fully answered and that “the partial victory” at Camp David would become a complete one.

29 Carter, Keeping Faith, 280, 438, 605.
30 Ibid., 281.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 281, 438.
Duty as a Christian, serving God with boldness—these were key in shaping Carter’s view of the Middle East and compelled him toward action.34 In late 1979, for example, citing the authority of the Bible in typical evangelical fashion, he said, “The Bible says, ‘Let me hear what God will speak, for He will speak peace to His people’” and “the Bible also says, ‘Depart from evil, do good, seek peace, pursue it—pursue it actively, search for peace.’”35

Carter insisted that promoting peace in the Middle East, “the land of the Bible,” was not a new vision, but an ancient one.36 It was a fulfillment of “the finest ideals based on the Hebrew Scriptures,” including the pursuit of justice and righteousness.37 It was a crucial part of “trying to find the ideal of Christ: peace on earth.”38 As the prophet Isaiah foretold, Carter explained in his address to the Knesset (March 12, 1979)—the first ever delivered by an American president before the Israeli parliament—that the Camp David project and peace treaty were good-faith steps towards “pounding Middle East swords into plowshares.”39 Upon his return to the United States, Carter praised Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat for “following the advice of the Biblical proverb, ‘When a man’s way pleases the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with Him.’”40 In this, Carter said, “I believe that God has answered our prayers.”41 It is often argued that Carter failed to articulate a broad political vision for his presidency. It is one of the lasting impressions of his four years. He promised too much and took on too many issues that were unrelated to a cohesive and coherent program. However, this argument cannot be said of his views of the Middle East. He had a vision, a vision in no small part inspired and informed by his reading of the Bible. And the success at Camp David proved to Carter that the application of religious principles “can be significant for peacemaking,” especially in the Middle East. For the observer, it showed that Carter’s beliefs and behavior were congruent.42

Carter viewed the Middle East not just in terms of national security or national interest. He viewed it as the “Holy Land,” a region full of religious significance. Many Americans do, too. In a 2003 Gallup survey, respondents were asked if the Middle East had any personal religious significance, either as the place where “biblical events will eventually occur” in the future or if it was religiously significant for other reasons. If not, respondents could choose “it is a land that is historically significant but does not have any personal religious significance.” Fifty percent of Americans claimed that region was religiously significant, 30 percent choosing the futuristic biblical event option and 20 percent choosing “religious significance for other reasons.” Forty-seven percent of those surveyed said it was a place of historical significance, but not “any personal religious significance.” But what is of particular interest is that 70 percent of those who claimed to be “born-again,” evangelical Christians said the Middle East has personal religious significance, 54 percent said so based on events to come and 16 percent for other personal religious reasons. Only 27 percent of those surveyed said that the region was more historically significant. Of those who said they were not “born-again,” 64 percent said the region was historically significant rather than religiously, while just 34 percent said the Middle East was personally important for some religious reason.43

35 Carter, “Remarks at a White House Reception for Participants at the World Conference on Religion and Peace,” September 6, 1979, Public Papers of the Presidents, Book II, 1598.
36 Carter, Keeping Faith, 280.
40 Carter, “Remarks on Arrival with Vice President Mondale at Andrews Air Force Base, Maryland,” March 14, 1979, Public Papers of the Presidents, Book I, 431.
41 Ibid., 432.
In 2003, the Pew Research Center found that 39 percent of white evangelicals said their religious beliefs were “the biggest influence on their thinking about the Middle East.” In contrast, 20 percent of Americans held that view. For “highly committed” white evangelicals (those who attend religious services regularly), the number increased to 46 percent. For white mainline Protestants and white Catholics, only 10 percent and 9 percent respectively said their religion had the most influence on their views toward the region. Though Carter did not say that his religion was the only influence on his views toward the region, he did list it first in his memoir and as president he frequently used religious language when describing and discussing the region.44

Among the religious beliefs that shape the Middle East thinking of white evangelicals is the belief that God gave the land of Israel to the Jewish people. In 2006, Pew found that 69 percent of white evangelicals believed this, whereas 42 percent of all Americans and less than 30 percent of white mainline Protestants (27 percent) and white Catholics (29 percent) did.45 In 2013, 82% of white evangelicals affirmed this view.46 As mentioned earlier, Carter wrote in Keeping Faith that he believed that the modern state of Israel was “ordained by God.”47

Though he did not mention it in his memoir, Carter said on a number of occasions that the establishment of the modern state of Israel was a fulfillment of Bible prophecy. “The land of Israel,” he confessed, “has always meant a great deal to me. As a boy I read of the prophets and martyrs in the Bible.”48 Based on the Bible, he explained, “The Jewish people are entitled to one place on this earth where they can have their own state on soil given them by God from time immemorial.”49 As both a presidential candidate and as a president, he affirmed, “The establishment of the nation of Israel is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy and the very essence of its fulfillment.”50 “Our nation’s overwhelming support for Israel comes from among Christians like me who have been taught since I was three years old to honor and protect God’s chosen people from among whom came our own Christian savior, Jesus Christ.”51

“I happen to be a Christian. Since I was 3 years old I’ve learned about the Hebrews, I’ve learned about the Israelites, I’ve learned about God’s chosen people, from whom Jesus Christ came, whom I worship. I teach about this every Sunday in my local church and I’ve been doing it since I was 18 years old, as a matter of fact. So we naturally are trying to want Israel to be secure and to survive – a commitment I maintain.”52

These sentiments are commonly held by white evangelicals in the United States. Pew found that 59 percent of white evangelicals believed that the creation of the modern state of Israel to be a fulfillment of Bible prophecy. This is not a widely held view among other Americans or other American Christians. In

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47 Carter, Keeping Faith, 281.
49 Ibid., 220.
the same study, Pew found that only 35 percent of Americans, 19 percent of white mainline Protestants and 21 percent of white Catholics believed this about Israel.\textsuperscript{53}

Going forward, these four survey questions provide a basic framework for examining the memoirs of Carter’s presidential contemporaries of the late Cold War period.

- Did Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush consider the Middle East as a region with religious significance?
- What clues are there that their religious beliefs had a major influence on how they saw Israel and the Middle East?
- Did they identify the land of Israel as being a gift from God to the Jewish people?
- Did they identify the modern State of Israel as having biblical significance, as being a fulfillment of Bible prophecy?

**Lyndon Johnson**

Over the course of his long political career, Lyndon Johnson considered Jews “one of his natural constituencies.”\textsuperscript{54} In contrast to the more Arabist officials in the federal bureaucracy, particularly the State Department, he had long expressed sympathy for “the Zionist cause” and he “felt a natural antipathy” toward the pan-Arabism of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser. “If anyone is [pro-Israel], I am,” he once said. Furthermore, he did not want anyone ever to think “I want to join up with the Arabs.”\textsuperscript{55} Still, Johnson was determined to follow the even-handed Middle East strategy of his predecessors Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy, maintaining strong ties with Israel and key Arab states. In the case of the Arabs, Johnson understood the importance of the region’s oil for the country and the Soviet Union’s desire to expand its influence there.

President Johnson had no plans for any bold involvement in the Middle East. The region may have been important, but throughout his presidency, Vietnam was to be Johnson’s foreign policy preoccupation, burden, and eventual political undoing. He did not give the region any serious attention until the 1967 Six-Day War. In fact, his inattention was blamed in some quarters for the war itself. For instance, the *Baltimore Sun* ran the headline, “U.S. Ignored Crisis Signs in Mideast” and described the outbreak of war as “one of the worst failures of United States foreign policy” since the U.S. began its involvement in Southeast Asia.\textsuperscript{56}

With the Six-Day War of June 1967, Johnson came to see that “trouble” in the Middle East was “potentially far more dangerous than the war in Southeast Asia.” As his successors would, Johnson feared that growing Soviet influence in the region might transform more moderate regimes into Soviet


\textsuperscript{54} Randall B. Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 768-769. Though by 1966, Woods wrote, Johnson’s “natural sympathy for Jews in general and Israel in particular was partially eclipsed by his anger over growing antiwar sentiment in the American Jewish community.” Exasperated, Johnson even “told Tel Aviv that if they did not get their American friends off his back over Vietnam they could forget about further aid” (772). For many “rank and file” Jewish Americans, ever since Johnson became president, the man “from oil-rich Texas” was “an object of suspicion” (768).


clients or pan-Arab radicals. Moreover, with increased Soviet influence, he worried that every little incident in the region could produce “an ultimate confrontation” between the two superpowers.\textsuperscript{57}

In his memoir, The Vantage Point, Johnson did not characterize the Middle East or his efforts in religious terms. As president, he “evinced little piety.”\textsuperscript{58} For him, U.S. interests were material interests, matters of security. The closest he came to discussing the region and Israel in religious terms can be found in two passages. In one, likely thinking about the events of the Holocaust and the birthpangs of war surrounding Israel’s independence in 1948, Johnson stressed his admiration for the Jewish people. “I have always had a deep feeling of sympathy for Israel and its people, gallantly building and defending a modern nation against great odds and against the tragic background of Jewish experience.” In the second, he described the region as the place “where our civilization began.”\textsuperscript{59}

Though he did not present any compelling regional vision for peace in his memoir, he concluded that two things must occur if peace was to happen. One pertained to the Arab countries and one to Israel. First, he said, “there could be no satisfactory future for the Middle East until the leaders and the peoples of the area turn away from the past, accepted Israel as a reality, and began working together to build modern societies, unhampered by old quarrels, bitterness, and enmity.” Second, and more specifically, he explained, that “while I understood the special problems of the people of Israel, living in a harassed and beleaguered fortress,” Israel, with its recent victory, needed to be magnanimous. With the Arab powers humiliated in defeat, “I believed the Israelis would have to reach out and help provide a basis of dignity for their neighbors…An Israel overconfident in victory would only weaken” the prospects for “a solid peace.”\textsuperscript{60}

\textbf{Richard Nixon}

Though burdened by the American involvement in Southeast Asia he inherited from the previous administration, finding peace in the Middle East was an early and continuing priority for President Richard Nixon. He was the first president to visit Israel while in office. Just weeks before he resigned, in June 1974, Nixon met with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. He visited the cities of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{61} But Nixon’s interest and pursuit of peace in the region, based on his memoir, evidently had nothing to do with his religious faith. Despite his close ties to the Reverend Billy Graham, the leading voice of American evangelicalism at the time, the interest of the Quaker president was predicated on the fear of Soviet influence and expansion and concern that another Arab-Israeli war could draw in the two superpowers.\textsuperscript{62}

In Nixon’s view, the Soviets were determined to increase and expand their presence in the Middle East, though not for expanding and promoting communism per se. He said the Soviets were seeking access to what they long desired — “land, oil, power and the warm waters of the Mediterranean” rather than ideological conversions. As he wrote in a memorandum to Secretary of State William Rogers, “The difference between our goal and the Soviet goal in the Middle East is very simple and fundamental. We want peace. They want the Middle East” [Nixon’s emphases].\textsuperscript{63}

To counter the aims of the Soviet Union, Nixon sought “a new balance of power” in the region. He said “the United States could not stand idly by and watch Israel being driven into the sea” or continuing to

\textsuperscript{57} Johnson, The Vantage Point, 287-288.
\textsuperscript{59} Johnson, The Vantage Point, 297, 304.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 304.
\textsuperscript{62} Although Nixon was not an evangelical, Graham was convinced Nixon was a religious man. Balmer, God in the White House, 63-68; see also Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, The Preacher and the Presidents: Billy Graham in the White House (New York: Center Street, 2007), 157-231.
\textsuperscript{63} Nixon, RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon, 477.
risk “the possibility of a direct U.S.-Soviet confrontation.”

To prevent these two outcomes, Nixon said U.S. policy needed a good dose of realism. That is, to prevent their becoming Soviet satellites, the United States must reach out to the “moderate Arab states, particularly Jordan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.” Such overtures served both U.S. and Israeli security interests. “Israel cannot survive forever,” he explained, “as an island in a sea of hatred.” So peace was in their interest. Mere preparation for war, Nixon believed, was not a real policy choice for Israel, especially “over a long period of time with a hundred million Arabs around them.” And for the United States, a successful mediation of “a peace settlement of Arab-Israeli differences” would constitute “a serious blow to the Soviet presence and prestige in the Middle East.” Working for peace, Nixon stated, enhanced U.S. credibility with the Arabs. It offered them “a place other than Moscow to turn.” Simply, as he wrote in his diary in 1973, Nixon believed “we just can’t let the thing ride and have a hundred million Arabs hating us and providing a fishing ground not only for [Arab] radicals, but, of course, for the Soviets.”

On the domestic front, Nixon was dismayed that many American Jewish leaders were too “unyielding and shortsighted” to see the larger strategic picture. They failed to understand that “those who deviate from the hard line of some of Israel’s more extreme supporters” were not necessarily “anti-Israel.” “Everyone must understand that being a friend of Israel’s neighbors does not make one an enemy of Israel.” Risking an Arab oil embargo and confrontation with the Soviet Union, he argued that he was fully committed to Israel’s security as evinced “in the 1973 war, [when] I ordered the massive airlift of equipment and materiel that enabled Israel to stop the two-front advance of Syria and Egypt.” “Our commitment to the survival of Israel runs deep,” he asserted. Though the United States and Israel were not formally aligned, the two countries were “bound together by something much stronger than any piece of paper: a moral commitment.” This is something past and future presidents have and “will faithfully honor” as he did. “America will never allow the sworn enemies of Israel to achieve their goal of destroying it.”

With regard to the occupied territories in the West Bank and Gaza, Nixon said he was concerned that if Israel tried to annex or absorb them, its Western-style democracy would be transformed into “a binational garrison state.” Citing the views of Israel’s first prime minister, in 1999: Victory Without War, Nixon said that David Ben-Gurion believed that if Israel’s extremists succeed, given the higher birth rate among Palestinians, “Israel will be neither Jewish nor democratic.” In time, “the Arabs will outnumber us, and undemocratic, repressive measures will be needed to keep them under control.” This, Nixon added, will not only destroy the democratic character of the Jewish state, it will “eventually bring about a united Arab world hostile to Israel” and provide “greater opportunities for Moscow to enter the region than ever before.”

In 1970, in a memorandum to then-National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, the President discussed his feelings and indicated the lurking “danger for Israel of relying on the prominent liberal and dove senators of both parties to come through in the event a crisis arose in which Israel was attacked by the Arabs or was even threatened directly by Soviet power.” He told Kissinger that the pro-Israel community “must recognize that our interests are basically pro-freedom and not just pro-Israel because of the Jewish vote. We are for Israel because Israel in our view is the only state in the Mideast which is pro-freedom and an effective opponent to Soviet expansion.” In other words, from his perspective, Israel was a valuable ally of the United States not because there was a “pro-Israel attitude prevalent in large and influential segments of the American Jewish community, Congress, the media, and in intellectual and cultural circles,” but because it was a democracy and it could be an effective ally in stopping the Soviets. For Nixon, issues of U.S.-Soviet superpower rivalry were of paramount concern, not the more mundane and parochial differences between Arab and Israeli. Therefore, the goal of the Nixon Administration was
“to construct a completely new set of power relationships in the Middle East — not only between Israel and the Arabs, but also among the United States, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union.”

Gerald Ford

In his memoir, A Time to Heal, Gerald Ford’s view of the Middle East was wholly secular and realist. Though personally religious and he had an evangelical spiritual advisor during his White House years, Ford believed that it was improper for presidents to conspicuously mix religion and politics. His one major appeal to religion was in his 1974 pardon of Nixon. Other than that, he considered it unseemly for presidents to publicly discuss their religious views or to capitalize on it for political purposes. Ford once said, “It’s not something one shouts from the housetops or wears on his sleeve. For me, my religious feeling is a deep personal faith I rely on for guidance from my God.” This is one of the things that he did not like about Carter’s brand of politics.

Ford’s general approach to religion and politics was reflected in his descriptions of Israel and the U.S. role in the Middle East. In his writings, there was no religious sense of mission or vision that one finds with Carter. The region’s issues were not communicated in theological or biblical terms. No Bible verses were invoked to justify involvement or policy positions, and instances of prayer were not cited as evidence that he was emboldened to persist in a particular policy direction when things got tough.

Like Johnson and Nixon, Ford said the Middle East was “one of my chief concerns.” He considered it important for the United States to secure the region’s oil supply to the West. He pledged to check Soviet power and influence. “Their only aim was to promote instability, so I wanted to keep them out.” He reaffirmed the country’s commitment to a “free and secure Israel” and to maintaining its “national integrity.” Echoing Nixon, Ford said he feared that if the peace process failed, moderate Arabs could be radicalized, creating more enemies for the United States. This, too, could create conditions for yet another Arab-Israeli war.

Ford spent much of his Middle East reflections in A Time to Heal criticizing Israel. He charged Israel and “the Israeli lobby” in the United States with blocking progress toward peace. Though Carter has been frequently criticized for some of his comments toward Israel and Israeli political leaders, Ford’s stern criticisms of Israel are less known.

Like Carter, Ford described the Israelis as “tough in their demands,” “less flexible,” “stalling,” “dragging their feet,” and “didn’t want to budge.” He wrote that they “didn’t seem to understand that only by giving do you get something in return.” He said that “their tactics frustrated the Egyptians and made me mad as hell.” Unlike the Egyptians who “bent over backward” in negotiations, Ford said, “the Israelis resisted.”

More pointedly, Ford asserted that he believed that “the Israelis had been engaged in a not very subtle campaign to discredit Kissinger.” “Because Henry was a Jew,” he continued, “the Israeli hard-liners said, he was bending over backward to be ‘fair’ to the Arabs. He was ‘out-Gentiling the Gentiles.’” Ford said,

72 Ford, A Time to Heal, 151, 183, 247, 286.
74 Ford, A Time to Heal, 246-247, 287, 291. See Paul Charles Merkley, American Presidents, Religion, and Israel: The Heirs of Cyrus (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 80-86. Though Ford does not claim a religious influence, Merkley nonetheless concludes, “There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of Ford’s effort to establish his moral commitment to Israel and to represent this effort as following from his own personal religious commitment.”

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“The fact that I had said I wanted to establish a personal relationship with Sadat seemed to worry the Israelis, and they decided to launch a counterattack” on him. “We had been engaged in a war of nerves with Israel.” The problem with the Israelis, Ford explained, was that they “were always insisting that we supply them more military equipment than our own experts thought they needed and far more than I thought we could afford.” “Their shopping list,” he added, “included sophisticated weaponry that even our own forces hadn’t received yet.”

To the pressure of a singularly focused “Israeli lobby,” Ford said he “was not going to capitulate” and threatened instead to go public with U.S.-Israel differences. For merely “suggesting the possibility of a reassessment of our policy toward Israel,” he claimed some in the American Jewish community thought “I must be anti-Israel or even anti-Semitic.”

When Secretary of State Kissinger finally succeeded in concluding an agreement with Israel and Egypt in September 1975, known as Sinai II, President Ford had only this to say in his memoir. After he had congratulated both Sadat and Rabin for their efforts, he called Kissinger. “This is a great achievement…And I know that the American people will be most grateful for the successful efforts that you made.”

Ronald Reagan

Evangelicals saw Ronald Reagan as a hero and the leader of a new great awakening. They believed that he would as president advance their agenda on abortion, school prayer, and other moral issues in a way Carter thought improper. They believed he would aggressively confront communism. For his part, Reagan promised he would. For example, at a gathering in Dallas, Texas in 1980, he told evangelical leaders, “I want you to know I endorse you and what you are doing.” By this time, too, Reagan was also identifying himself as an evangelical. At election time, evangelicals gave Reagan strong support in 1980 and 1984.

Given his strong relationship with evangelicals, his own self-identification, and his frequent use of religious rhetoric as president, it is surprising that religion was not featured in Reagan’s memoir, An American Life. Reagan did, however, explain why he was not a regular churchgoer when he was president. He cited the threat of terrorism and his concern that his very presence at church would be too disrupting to the worship service. “Very unhappily, we just had to stop going to church altogether, and we really missed it.”

In terms of Israel and the Middle East, there is nothing that suggests Reagan’s views were motivated or influenced by his faith. He did not offer quotes from the Bible, made no proclamations of Bible prophecy being fulfilled, related no lessons learned from Sunday school, and said virtually nothing remotely “holy” about the region. Reagan, nonetheless, did make his pro-Israel views clear. “I’ve believed many things in my life, but no conviction I’ve ever held has been stronger than my belief that the

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75 Ford, A Time to Heal, 287, 308.
76 Ibid., 247-248, 286, 288
77 Ibid., 309.
United States must ensure the survival of Israel.” But his pro-Israel position and his justification for U.S. involvement in the region were seemingly not based on religious reasons. If his personal faith was a factor, he did not mention it in his memoir.

As in Europe, Africa, and Latin America, Reagan was especially concerned about Soviet expansion in the Middle East. “Reflecting his general view of foreign policy, Reagan placed primary emphasis on the Soviet threat to the Middle East, not on the Arab-Israeli dispute.” Reagan came into office “as a determined anti-communist.” Consistent with this, in his memoir, Reagan listed fear of Soviet expansionism first among his reasons for backing Israel. He wrote, “Under Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet Union was eager to exploit any opportunity to expand its influence and supplant the United States as the dominant superpower in this oil-rich and strategically important part of the world.” Second, Reagan expressed his “irreversible commitment to the survival and territorial integrity of Israel.” Based on these two points, Reagan viewed Israel “as an important strategic asset in the confrontation with the Soviet Union.” In this role as a strategic ally, Reagan saw Israel as part of a global strategy in confronting and containing the Soviets.

Reagan further explained that he wanted to resist Soviet expansion in the region and protect the region’s oilfields, “coveted by the Communist world.” He believed as well that U.S. involvement would deter “the radical, anti-American Iranian revolution from spreading” and the consequences that would likely bring to “our economy.” He said he wanted to send a message to “our allies and to Moscow that the United States supported its friends” in the Middle East and around the world. From this president, Reagan argued, there would not be an abandonment of U.S. allies as the Carter administration had done with Iran and Nicaragua. He believed that U.S. involvement would protect Israel, “a small country virtually surrounded by enemies.” During his term, “I repeatedly emphasized that the United States was committed to ensuring Israel’s survival and would do nothing to diminish its position of military superiority” in the region.

The closest Reagan got to using religious or biblical language is in two comments he made about the source of regional conflict and Jewish ties to the area. Reagan described the Middle East as “a region where hate has roots reaching back to the dawn of history. It’s a place where the senseless spilling of blood in the name of religious faith has gone on since biblical times, and where modern events are forever being shaped by momentous events of the past, from the Exodus to the Holocaust.” He further noted that Jewish claims to “the land called Palestine” can be traced back to “the time of Abraham and Moses,” when “a great Hebrew civilization blossomed.” But he goes no further. Unlike Carter, who saw in his religious faith as a critical source of inspiration and solutions for conflict resolution, Reagan seems to have identified religion as not much more than a source of regional violence. Reagan did offer a moral reason for his commitment to Israel. He explained that the United States had a moral responsibility to help Israel because of the Jewish experience in Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.

The Holocaust, I believe, left America with a moral responsibility to ensure that what had happened to the Jews under Hitler never happens again. We must not let it happen again. The civilized world owes a debt to the people who were the greatest victims of Hitler’s madness.

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86. Ibid., An American Life, 410-411, 414-415.
87. Ibid., 407-408.
88. Ibid., 410.
On a final note, Reagan, like other presidents before him, also mentioned the shared values between the United States and Israel. He wrote, “My dedication to the preservation of Israel was as strong when I left the White House as when I arrived there, even though this tiny ally, with whom we share democracy and many other values, was a source of great concern for me while I was president.”

**George H.W. Bush**

In matters of religion, unlike his son who would become president years later, George H.W. Bush was normally reserved. He was an Episcopalian, he was raised in a religious home, and he attended church routinely throughout his life. He was great friends with Billy Graham. He considered the Reverend Jerry Falwell, another leading evangelical figure of the time and the founder of the Moral Majority, as a friend. Like Reagan, he said, without hesitancy or awkwardness, he could be counted as an evangelical. “There was never any doubt that Jesus Christ was my Savior and Lord…there has been a total conviction on this point.” But religion was not a centerpiece of his political identity or style. To illustrate, once when asked, “Is there a spiritual side to George Bush?,” Bush gave this response.

Yes, there is a spiritual side. I haven’t always found it easy to discuss this in public, since my faith has been a very personal thing to me.

When he did discuss his faith, he usually talked about the importance of prayer. “Prayer had always been an important part of our lives.” In his inaugural address, Bush called the country to prayer. It was the opening act of his presidency.

…[M]y first act as President is a prayer. I ask you to bow your heads…Heavenly Father, we bow our heads and thank You for Your love. Accept our thanks for the peace that yields this day and the shared faith that makes its continuance likely. Make us strong to do Your work, willing to heed and hear Your will, and write on our hearts these words: ‘Use power to help people.’ For we are given power not to advance our own purposes, nor to make a great show in the world, nor a name. There is but one just use of power, and it is to serve people. Help us remember, Lord. Amen.

Though the Palestinian intifada, which began in 1987, was well underway at the start of his presidency, resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict was not a high priority for George H.W. Bush. President Bush did not give serious attention to the region until August 1990 when Saddam Hussein’s Iraq invaded Kuwait. He did not turn his focus to the Arab-Israeli peace process until after the war with Iraq ended.

After the Iraqi invasion, the President described Hussein as “evil” and the Iraqi occupation of its neighbor as a matter of “good versus evil,” “right versus wrong.” In a letter to Saudi Arabia’s King Fahd (November 22, 1990), Bush noted how proud he was that the United States and Saudi Arabia were “standing shoulder against Iraq’s evil dictator.” In a letter to Cardinal Bernard Francis Law (January 22, 1991), he explained that the 1991 Gulf War was a just war. He said that “failing to use force” to resist armed aggressions “is an immoral position.” He added that “in certain situations, using force is not immoral, not against God’s will.” From this point through the conclusion of the war, Bush’s main focus

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89 Ibid.
91 Ibid., 34.
92 Ibid., 33.
was to rally international opinion against the invasion and forge a Western-Arab coalition to expel Iraqi forces. It was the high point of his presidency.95

In his book, All The Best, George Bush, comments about Israel and Middle East were virtually absent. Of Israeli prime ministers, only Labor Party leader Shimon Peres was mentioned in an approving way and that was from a letter written while Bush was the Vice President (August 3, 1986). In it, Bush said, “I am convinced that Peres wants peace.”96 His only references to the American Jewish community were some remarks concerning the Jewish Defense League, an organization “led by the outrageous and radical Meir Kahane” that “used disruptive, radical tactics against the Soviet Union” to protest the treatment of Soviet Jews.97

Regarding Middle East policy, Bush declared in a letter to Syrian President Hafez al-Assad that the United States’ position was closer to the Arab view than Israel’s and made clear that the United States did not recognize Israel’s annexation of territories acquired by war. “Territory for peace applied to all fronts, including the Golan Heights,” Bush said. “We will not change this fundamental policy position of ours; nor will we change our non-recognition of Israel’s purported ‘Annexation’ of the Golan Heights” (June 1, 1991). It was Bush’s hope that the successful conclusion of the 1991 Gulf War “created new opportunities for progress in the peace process” between Israel and its Arab neighbors and he wanted Syria to take full advantage of “these new opportunities” that “may not come again.”98

In his book with National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, A World Transformed, beyond Iraq, very little was described or discussed about the Arab-Israeli conflict and the peace process. Purposely, they noted up front that their book would contain little on these points, except for the war with Iraq.99

The few points that were included about Israel centered on administration fears that Israel would jeopardize the fragile Western-Arab war coalition against Iraq if it responded to an attack from Iraq during the war. Israel did not respond. Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir was praised for his restraint; it was “one of his finest moments,” wrote Scowcroft. “Whatever other problems may have arisen between us and Shamir from time to time, on this occasion, he showed himself a strong, stalwart ally.” Bush asserted, “Because of the Arab-Israeli tensions, throughout the crisis Israel remained very carefully placed outside the coalition.” “I knew,” he said, “we could not build a truly broad coalition, one that included many Arab nations, if Israel were part of it.” When violence broke out at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in October 1990 and Israeli forces “fired into the crowd, killing 21 Palestinians and injuring more than 150,” the Bush Administration supported a UN resolution condemning Israel “for using excessive force and called for a more restricted” investigative mission in “the occupied territories.” From the viewpoint of the Bush administration, the U.S.-sponsored measure viewed Israel “as the occupying power under the Geneva Convention” and was responsible for the “protection” of Palestinians under their jurisdiction. Not surprisingly, the Israelis were not pleased with this. Bush and Scowcroft wrote, “Our relations with Israel hit a new low” and “the Jewish community in the United States was surprised, hurt, and furious.”100

After the war with Iraq, Bush observed that the organization of the Madrid Conference in October 1991 was “a quick and substantial payoff” that came from “our new credibility” in simultaneously working with various Arab states to liberate a fellow Arab country and coming to the defense of Israel. It “was one of the direct fruits of the Gulf War.” “Without the successful prosecution of that conflict and our coalition-building with our Arab allies,” he said, “such a meeting would have been impossible.” He explained that he “hoped to take advantage of the goodwill we had forged with our Arab allies to advance regional peace and security.” Bush particularly thanked Secretary of State James Baker for his role in

96 Ibid., 350. Reagan, too, was very fond of Prime Minister Peres. In his diary (September 15, 1986), he wrote, “I admire him very much and am sorry the political rotation agreement [between the Labor and Likud parties] will see him replaced with P.M. Shamir...He’s done a great job seeing the way toward peace in the Middle East.” Reagan, The Reagan Diaries, 437.
97 Bush, All the Best, George Bush, 141r. See also Bush, Looking Forward, 113-114.
98 Bush, All the Best, George Bush, 524.
100 Ibid., 378-379, 452, 455-456.
making the conference possible. But this was all the 41st President had to say on the matter. His thoughts quickly turned to developments in the near moribund Soviet Union and his relations with Mikhail Gorbachev. Bush ended his brief mention of Madrid with “I looked forward to another opportunity to see Gorbachev in Madrid and talk to him at length.”

Conclusion
In terms of foreign policy, it is important to know what a president thinks. He is after all “the most important individual in the conduct of American foreign policy.” He defines the “overall collective image” of the administration. Therefore, when studying the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is important to examine the perspective of the president, “to know how the president...makes sense of the many arguments, the mountain of ‘facts,’ the competing claims he hears.” Additionally, presidents may not be purely rational or strategic in their thinking, nor mere prisoners of so-called national interest or bureaucratic politics. While what constitutes the country’s interests may in fact be generally static over time, all presidents have some particular views of the region and the nature of the conflict, and their degree of interest and involvement varies. By extension, what exactly constitutes a nation’s interest “contains a strong subjective element.” It has also been said that “presidential personality and inclinations” can have a tremendous effect on diplomatic situations, the establishment of policy priorities, and the level of presidential involvement. To explore and examine this “subjective” dimension of U.S. Mideast policy, this essay investigated the views of President Carter and the five other presidents of the late Cold War period. By examining the memoirs of these presidents, it was found that President Carter had a distinctly religious perspective.

Using a basic framework of four questions informed by survey research conducted by the Gallup Poll Organization and the Pew Research Center, this study demonstrates that Carter was the only president from 1963 to 1993 who derived his basic views of Israel and the Middle East from his religious beliefs, who believed that God gave the Jewish people the land of Israel, and who believed that the modern establishment of the state of Israel was compatible with Bible prophecy. Put differently, according to Carter, Israel and the wider region had intrinsic value to the United States because the land was holy and peacemaking was a “sacred task” to undertake. Carter was an evangelical president with arguably an evangelical worldview.

In his second post-presidential book, also with an ostensible religious title, The Blood of Abraham, Carter summarized his Middle East perspective this way: “For me there is no way to approach or enter Israel without thinking first about the Bible and the history of the land and its people. The names and images have long been an integral part of my life as a Christian.” These basic beliefs, it is argued, motivated Carter to work for peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors, specifically Egypt, in spite of the political and electoral risks that ensued.

For Carter’s presidential contemporaries, from Lyndon Johnson to George H.W. Bush, religion was noticeably absent from their Middle East recollections. Based upon their memoirs, all the other presidents simply did not view the significance of Israel and the Middle East the same way Carter did and most evangelicals do. For this subject, their memoirs simply contain little or nothing about their faith. They may mention religion in other ways, but not in regards to Israel and the Middle East. For presidents other than Carter who had a strong religious faith, who had close evangelical advisors or connections to the evangelical community, who had earned a reputation for being comfortable publicly expressing that faith, or who openly courted and received strong support from evangelical voters, the absence of religion-

102 Rosati, The Carter Administration’s Quest for Global Community, 159-160.
103 Quandt, Peace Process, 9, 11.
talk, faith-based explanations, and biblical references is surprising. Instead, what one finds is that when it comes to Israel and the Middle East, other presidents are very secular in their communicative and cognitive styles.

By and large, the two common concerns for most presidents during the late Cold War period were fear of greater Soviet influence in the region and fear that the Arab-Israeli conflict could ultimately escalate to a world war between the two superpowers. As such, Middle East peace was desired not because it would fulfill some biblical, Christian-like obligation to pursue peace. Rather, peace was desired in the interests of national security. Furthermore, the general consensus among the presidents was that peace would stabilize Arab states, provide security for Israel, minimize the appeal of pan-Arabism, and likely secure continued Western access to the region’s oil.

In fairness to each former president, admittedly a broad survey of their other writings, speeches, and comments would need to be examined to make a more definitive judgment. This is a clear limitation of the current study. Nonetheless, use of presidential memoirs is one accepted means of “getting inside the mind” of a president. Certainly, if sincerely held, such a profound influence as religious faith should be readily evident.

The fact that President Carter was the lone president in this period to employ the language of faith in his memoirs to explain his Mideast views suggests that there was something quite genuine about his public religiosity. It shows that he had a stable and constant image of the region and he acted on it. It suggests that his many expressions of faith on the campaign trail in 1976 and during his four years in office were not cynical, instrumental ploys merely to win votes. Even after suffering a crushing defeat in 1980, as the title of his memoir aptly captured, Carter was still “keeping faith.” When examined from a comparative perspective as done here, the evidence points to a conclusion that Carter indeed had “a different way of governing.”