

Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, Parents

This year marks President Jimmy Carter's 80th birthday. He is ten years older than I. Today, I caught a snippet of a national public radio conversation with Jimmy. He was very clear: our war with Iraq is unjust, immoral, and unnecessary. (Amen, I said.) As is frequently the case, a voice from my past set me thinking.

Jimmy and his wife, Rosalynn, had three children, all boys, in close succession, then after a gap of 15 years, had a daughter. My wife and I had four children, all daughters, in quick succession, and then five years later, another daughter. Jimmy and I have some experience raising children, especially raising the last child as an only child.

After the 1976 Democratic Convention, I found myself in a small plane with Governor Jerry Brown, flying from Atlanta to Plains, Georgia, to meet with the newly nominated Democratic candidate for president, Jimmy Carter. We were to be joined there by Gray Davis, who was Governor Brown's chief of staff in California.

The purpose of this get-together was a kind of kiss and make up, let's get to know each other better, and will you help me meeting. Earlier in the year, Jerry Brown had thrown his hat into the presidential ring to run against Jimmy for the nomination. Some of Jerry's close supporters had urged him to start much sooner, but he couldn't make up his mind, yes or no, so he did nothing until it was virtually too late to overtake Carter's two-year head start.

Even so, Brown had proven to be a troublesome primary candidate against Carter. For one thing, he was immensely popular in California, the state with the most electoral votes; he was a master of the TV and radio sound bite; and he understood the role and the meaning of the mass media in politics. On a more substantive level, Brown was a cutting-edge thinker about the environment, the global village, small is beautiful, and the plight of farmworkers. Carter respected Jerry Brown's popular appeal and needed his support for his own presidential campaign.

This was my first exposure to Southern hospitality, and I was not disappointed. We were warmly greeted by Jimmy and Rosalynn, who ushered

us into what I took to be a family room large enough to comfortably seat a dozen people. We formed a sort of elliptical circle so that each person felt a part of the group. After the usual introductions and exchange of pleasantries, Jimmy took charge of the conversation and began to recount and analyze why his two-year campaign for the presidential nomination had been successful. It was obvious that he took great satisfaction in his accomplishment, and he spoke in great detail, point by point, as one would expect from a former Navy officer and a highly trained engineer. I remember thinking that the “how” of what he did – in other words, the process – was more of an accomplishment in his mind than the accomplishment itself.

After his opening presentation, which lasted quite some time, Jimmy turned to Rosalynn, and invited her to brief us about her role in his quest for the presidential nomination. Indeed, she seemed more than willing, not at all shy, to retell her part of their conquest story, and without any hesitation she dove in.

Even though she was soft-spoken, I could feel the animation and the excitement in her voice as she began to relive those early, elementary days of Jimmy’s presidential campaign. I was fascinated, because it resonated with my own experiences in working with Cesar Chavez during the early days of his farmworker movement. With due respect to all who were part of Jimmy’s group that day, I was the only one besides Rosalynn who had had any long-term experience with grassroots organizing. I understood and admired the importance of what she had done and its underlying significance for the development of their campaign. Jerry Brown, Gray Davis, Jody Powell, and the others were a product of and wedded to the use of mass media, especially TV, to organize others and promote their message.

Rosalynn and a close friend would drive into the county seat of a rural area, park in the town square, and begin to organize. First, to the mayor’s office. Of course she knew that he had never heard of Jimmy, but no matter. She introduced herself, explained that her husband was running for president, presented a piece of campaign literature that would explain her husband’s qualifications, and then asked if there was a newspaper and/or a radio station in town. Good, she would introduce herself and meet with them. First, the newspaper. She carried with her what might be called a press release, but it was much longer and contained much information about Jimmy Carter the

person, his vision, and his presidential aspirations. This was important because small-town, low-overhead newspapers need ready-made articles. With a little luck, she would get the editor to include Jimmy's picture with the article, or sometimes her own on-the-spot photo as Jimmy's messenger to the area. If an interview was requested, she supplied the interviewer with a list of questions to ask her, which of course she answered. And then on to the radio station – same story, same result.

If it was late in the afternoon, too late to repeat this process in the next county seat, she would ask if there might be an interested person in town with a spare bedroom who might be willing to put her (and her traveling companion) up for the night; that is, if it wasn't too much trouble.

You have to remind yourself, no one had heard of Jimmy Carter, even though he was the governor of Georgia, and the next presidential election was at least two years into the future. Rosalynn spent nearly two full years of her life organizing in this grassroots fashion, reaching tens of thousands of people in early primary states long before the first primary election would be held in those states. Equally important, she established a beachhead in each of those communities in which she had hustled lodging for herself. Someday, she would bring Jimmy himself back to these beachheads, which by that time had been transformed and mobilized into an active support base. Consider, when you have provided overnight hospitality to the wife of a man running for president, you have a vested interest in the outcome. Living off the land is the best kind of organizing, and one with which I was well acquainted.

When Rosalynn finished, she left the room to put the finishing touches on dinner preparations, and the rest of the meeting was spent hammering out some political nuts-and-bolts business between Jerry and Jimmy. The usual stuff.

Dinner was served. Jerry, Gray, and I took our places in the small dining area directly off the kitchen. Nine-year-old Amy Carter arrived at the table and took a place. She sat to my left, across from her parents. If she made any acknowledgement of the guests present, I don't remember it. She had carried a book with her to the table, opened it, and proceeded to read quietly for the rest of the meal. She probably ate a little something, but I don't remember that she did.

I looked at Jimmy and Rosalynn sitting across the table to my right. They said nothing to Amy, she did not look at them, the dinner proceeded as if she was not present, but of course, she was. A few years later, I read that much to the consternation of some members of the Washington press corps, Amy had read a book during the course of a White House state dinner.

All of this happened a long time ago and, I suppose, is of little import. However, in the course of trying to raise my own children, especially my youngest, I have had occasion to remember and think about Amy's dinnertime book reading.

My wife and I were parental sticklers for eating together as a family. If we had dinner guests known to them, they were expected to eat with us, although after they finished their dinner they could be excused, as they wished. If the guests were total strangers and/or if the dinner was work-related, then they ate together separately before the grown-ups ate dinner. I can only guess that the Carters followed, more or less, these same family dinner parenting principles.

But here is the rub. When the youngest child, the "baby" of the family, ends up being raised in effect as an only child, the customary and usual principles do not apply. It was certainly true in our case, with only a five-year age separation, and I expect it would be even more true for an age difference of 15 years, as was the case with the Carters. Neither my wife nor I made a conscious decision to raise our fifth differently from the others, but our approach was as different as day and night.

Why was this? For one thing, with four under our belt, we were more relaxed as parents, more tolerant, and less demanding than with the older ones. Let's face it, raising children wears you down. NO is the operative word, only an occasional YES can be said, and BECAUSE I SAID SO is the commonplace explanation. This kind of parenting, the kind my wife and I each learned from our own parents, is hard work, saps your morale, and chews up your self-image about being a nice and caring person. Most of the time you feel like a martinet.

This all changes when you raise the “baby” of the family. You have more time to spend with just one, and you enjoy it more. The last child is more eager to tag along on errands, be a pal, and she gets the treat without having to ask for it. Instead of buzzing around town on Saturday to catch four soccer games, all your attention can now be given to just one game and your budding all-star. YES becomes preferable and feels much better. Giving in to child-like requests is easier, more satisfying, and avoids a test of wills. In a word, our attitude became, spare the rod, spoil the child, and we’ll worry about it later.

Amy Carter was born into a political family and raised as an only child. Her mother was a full partner in her husband’s presidential quest. When Amy was four, her father became governor, and by age ten, he was president of the United States. By the time I met her, age nine, reading a book at the dining room table in Plains, she must have been through this political-guests-for-dinner routine a thousand times or more. As their special child, her parents desired her presence and participation. It was good for her education, it was a family meal together even though yet another set of political guests was present. Please come to the table, be with us. And she did, but not quite, but perhaps enough to meet the letter if not always the spirit of the request.

Parenting a child is difficult and confusing even under the best of conditions, but parenting a child in a family heavily invested in politics is even more so. It is a series of unappealing trade-offs, and finding the balance, if one even exists, is nearly impossible. Perhaps for Amy and her parents, reading at the table in the presence of guests was simply one of those delicate trade-offs, agreeable enough to all sides, given the circumstances of their situation.

How did Amy Carter turn out, you ask? I don’t know, but if I had to answer that question based on spoiling our fifth, I would say just fine, thank you.

(Oh, I almost forgot: that night in Plains, 28 years ago, Rosalynn served a first-rate Southern country-style dinner, and I ate my fair share, including seconds. It was delicious, and thank you, ma’am.)

