

Why won't Carter debate his book?

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YOU CAN ALWAYS tell when a public figure has written an indefensible book: when he refuses to debate it in the court of public opinion. And you can always tell when he's a hypocrite to boot: when he says he wrote a book in order to stimulate a debate, and then he refuses to participate in any such debate. I'm talking about former president Jimmy Carter and his new book "Palestine Peace Not Apartheid."

Carter's book has been condemned as "moronic" (Slate), "anti- historical" (The Washington Post), "laughable" (San Francisco Chronicle), and riddled with errors and bias in reviews across the country. Many of the reviews have been written by non-Jewish as well as Jewish critics, and not by "representatives of Jewish organizations" as Carter has claimed. Carter has gone even beyond the errors of his book in interviews, in which he has said that the situation in Israel is worse than the crimes committed in Apartheid South Africa. When asked whether he believed that Israel's "persecution" of Palestinians was "[e]ven worse ... than a place like Rwanda," Carter answered, "Yes. I think - yes."

When Larry King referred to my review several times to challenge Carter, Carter first said I hadn't read the book and then blustered, "You know, I think it's a waste of my time and yours to quote professor Dershowitz. He's so obviously biased, Larry, and it's not worth my time to waste it on commenting on him." (He never did answer King's questions.)

The next week Carter wrote a series of op-eds bemoaning the reception his book had received. He wrote that his "most troubling experience" had been "the rejection of [his] offers to speak" at "university campuses with high Jewish enrollment." The fact is that Brandeis President Jehuda Reinharz had invited Carter to come to Brandeis to debate me, and Carter refused. The reason Carter gave was this: "There is no need to for me to debate somebody who, in my opinion, knows nothing about the situation in Palestine."

As Carter knows, I've been to Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza, many times - certainly more times than Carter has been there - and I've written three books dealing with the subject of Middle Eastern history, politics, and the peace process. The real reason Carter won't debate me is that I would correct his factual errors. It's not that I know too little; it's that I know too much.

Nor is Carter the unbiased observer of the Middle East that he claims to be. He has accepted money and an award from Sheik Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan, saying in 2001: "This award has special significance for me because it is named for my personal friend, Sheik Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan." This is the same Zayed, the long- time ruler of the United Arab Emirates, whose \$2.5 million gift to the Harvard Divinity School was returned in 2004 due to Zayed's rampant Jew-hatred. Zayed's personal foundation, the Zayed Center, claims that it was Zionists, rather than Nazis, who "were the people who killed the Jews in Europe" during the Holocaust. It has held lectures on the blood libel and conspiracy theories about Jews and America perpetrating Sept. 11. Carter's acceptance of money from this biased group casts real doubt on his objectivity and creates an obvious conflict of interest.

Carter's refusal to debate wouldn't be so strange if it weren't for the fact that he claims that he wrote the book precisely so as to start debate over the issue of the Israel-Palestine peace process. If that were really true, Carter would be thrilled to have the opportunity to debate. Authors should be accountable for their ideas and their facts. Books shouldn't be like chapel, delivered from on high and believed on faith.

What most rankles is Carter's insistence that he is somehow brave for attacking Israel and highlighting the plight of the Palestinian people. No other conflict in the world - not even the genocides in Rwanda and Sudan - evokes more hand-wringing in the media, universities, and human rights organizations than the Israel- Palestine conflict.

Jimmy Carter isn't brave for beating up on Israel. He's a bully. And like all school-yard bullies, underneath the tough talk and bravado, there's a nagging insecurity and a fear that one day he'll have to answer for himself in a fair fight.

When Jimmy Carter's ready to speak at Brandeis, or anywhere else, I'll be there. If he refuses to debate, I will still be there - ready and willing to answer falsity with truth in the court of public opinion.

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