

# **Dignitaries laud Jimmy Carter as ‘good and faithful servant’**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Scores of lawmakers and other dignitaries huddled together in the U.S. Capitol rotunda Jan. 7 for a memorial service honoring former President Jimmy Carter.

Carter’s casket, draped in an American flag, arrived at the Capitol via horse-drawn caisson late Tuesday afternoon, completing its long journey northward from Carter’s home in Plains, Ga.

After service members outside offered a 21-gun salute that could be heard echoing across the rotunda’s cavernous walls, Carter’s remains slowly were walked into the building.

## **‘He made the world more palatable’**

Once the casket was placed in the center of the room and members of Carter’s family took their seats, U.S. Senate Chaplain Barry Black offered an invocation.

“We proclaim your generosity to this nation and world for giving us the gift of someone with the ethical congruence to be salt and light to his generation,” Black prayed. “Lord, he made the world more palatable.”

A room packed with Washington’s most powerful looked on as he spoke, the bipartisan delegation a rare expression of unity in a historically polarized time. Senators Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock of Georgia were positioned closest to the casket, both nodding somberly throughout the service.

Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California, leaning on a walker she

has used since undergoing hip surgery last month, stood amid a gaggle of House members that also included Republican Rep. Jim Jordan, who lingered near the back.

Across the room, Supreme Court Justices Elena Kagan, Brett Kavanaugh and John Roberts stood behind members of President Joe Biden's administration and a row of eulogists designated for the occasion: Senate Majority Leader John Thune, House Speaker Mike Johnson and Vice President Kamala Harris.

## **'Not to be served but to serve'**

Thune, like all speakers at the service, made a point to mention Carter's faith, recounting a story about when the former president went on a mission trip in Massachusetts as a young man. Carter, Thune said, asked a fellow missionary about his secret to success, to which the man replied, "I try to have two loves in my heart: one love is for God, and the other love I have in my heart is for the person who happens to be in front of me at any particular time."

Thune said Carter never forgot the advice, but added, "I think it's fair to say that it's also a statement he lived by," citing Carter's work with Habitat for Humanity after his presidency.

"The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and Jimmy Carter did his very best to live according to the calling of his Lord and Savior," Thune said.

Thune noted the mission trip was conducted by the Southern Baptist Convention, a denomination Carter belonged to for most of his life until 2000, when he disavowed the group after getting frustrated with its opposition to women's ordination and its stance on women's roles in general.

Carter and his wife Rosalynn were longtime members of Maranatha Baptist Church, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship congregation in Georgia, where he taught Sunday school until late in his life.

In his eulogy, Johnson recalled Carter's service in the U.S. Navy, noting a nuclear submarine, the USS Jimmy Carter, still bears his name. Johnson also highlighted Carter's work to eradicate diseases in places such as Africa.

"In the face of illness, President Jimmy Carter brought lifesaving medicine. In the face of conflict, he brokered peace. In the face of discrimination, he reminded us that we are all made in the image of God," Johnson said. "And if you were to ask him why he did it all, he would likely point to his faith."

Johnson added: "I'm reminded of his admonition to live our lives as though Christ were coming this afternoon, and of his amazing personal reflection: 'If I have one life and one chance, to make it count for something.' We all agree that he certainly did."

## **'Left the world better than he found it'**

Harris closed out the speaking section of the program. The vice president, who recently lost her presidential bid to President-elect Donald Trump, did not mention her bittersweet connection to Carter: He reportedly aspired to live long enough to cast a ballot for Harris, a goal he achieved in November before dying last month at age 100.

Harris opened her eulogy by referencing what she said was her favorite hymn, "May the Works I Have Done Speak for Me." After pointing out that Carter grew up in a home without electricity and praising his various efforts after his single term in the White House, she focused her remaining remarks on Carter's time as president.

Harris lauded his appointment of a record-breaking number of Black Americans to the federal bench, his energy policy and legacy of environmental protections, as well as his stewardship of the Camp David Accords, which Harris called “the most significant and enduring peace treaty since World War II.”

“He lived his faith, he served his people, and left the world better than he found it,” she said.

As she finished, the Glee Club of the U.S. Naval Academy—Carter’s alma mater—launched into an a cappella rendition of “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” their voices reverberating around the round room.

The eulogists—along with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries and Doug Emhoff, the vice president’s husband—then laid a series of wreaths around the casket before the Glee Club sang “Eternal Father, Strong to Save,” a hymn long associated with naval service.

U.S. House Chaplain Margaret Kibben, herself a retired rear admiral and former chief chaplain of the U.S. Navy, offered the closing benediction. She referred to Carter as a “good and faithful servant,” a phrase from Matthew 25.

As Kibben closed, she weaved in Micah 6:8, a Bible verse Carter cited in his own inaugural address 48 years ago, when he stood just outside the same Capitol and took his oath of office.

“Ignite in us the same passion for public service, the courage to champion the underserved, the strength to bear as faithfully the weight of the call to which you have called each one of us: to do as justly, to love mercy as unreservedly, to walk as humbly with you as we have witnessed in the testimony of President Jimmy Carter’s life of faithfulness,” she prayed.

Members of Carter's family then rose and began paying respects to the late president, circling his casket, which will remain in the rotunda until it is moved to the Washington National Cathedral for yet another service on Jan. 9. Several of the family members wiped away tears as they passed.

A number of lawmakers also appeared emotional at the loss of Carter, each a window into the multifaceted aspects of his legacy. Some placed a hand over their heart, while others, such as Justices Roberts and Kavanaugh, crossed themselves, as did Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg.

Rep. Rashida Tlaib, one of the few Muslim Americans in Congress and the only Palestinian American, grew visibly moved as she passed the casket, pausing for a moment to lower her hands and offer what appeared to be a private prayer.

She wore a Palestinian kaffiyeh, which the Democrat wrote in a later Instagram post was meant "to show my gratitude for his courageous stance in speaking out against apartheid and standing up for peace"—a reference to Carter's advocacy for better treatment of Palestinians.

As the dignitaries began to file out and the crowd began to thin, the band struck up yet another tune, this time sparking a smattering of small grins among the otherwise somber crowd as they played "Georgia on My Mind."