

Jimmy Carter: Submariner; Nuclear Engineer; 39th President

On December 12, 1952, the NRX nuclear reactor in Chalk River, Canada, suffered the first partial nuclear meltdown in history. Because the disaster was unprecedented, a plan was needed to be developed to dismantle the reactor, clean the site and rebuild. At the time, the U.S. Navy's nuclear submarine program was the most experienced to deal with the threatening danger. Admiral Hyman Rickover selected Lieutenant James Earl Carter, 1946 graduate of the Naval Academy at Annapolis and nuclear engineer, to lead a crew of 22 men to come up with a plan and put it into effect. Because of the intense radiation (present in his urine for 6 months afterwards), the men could only work in 90 second shifts after being lowered onto the reactor dome. Nevertheless, they succeeded in dismantling the reactor and preventing a full meltdown. Within a few years, the plant was in operation. Jimmy Carter was 28 years old at the time.

In 1979, the Three Mile Island nuclear plant on the Susquehanna River, just 10 miles downstream of the state capital Harrisburg, suffered a similar partial meltdown when a pressure valve failed and operators mistakenly shut off the emergency cooling system, causing temperatures to rise to 4000 degrees, just 1000 degrees short of a total meltdown. A toxic, irradiated bubble of hydrogen and xenon formed, and radiation was emitted into the atmosphere when some of the gas exploded. Pregnant women and pre-schoolers were evacuated, and Governor Thornburgh urged the terrified residents to stay indoors until the situation was safely under control.

Jimmy Carter, 39th president at the time, joined by his wife Rosalynn, decided to come to the facility to reassure the residents that everything would be done to prevent a full meltdown, clean up the contamination and make sure a disaster like this would never happen again. The two of them donned protective apparel, hopped on a yellow school bus and inspected the reactor themselves.

When I read condescending and inflammatory rubbish such as "As president, Carter's faults were conspicuous, so they do not need repeating here," suggesting that his term was a failure, I begin to meltdown myself. Let's focus instead on Carter's unequalled achievements: Lasting peace between Egypt and Israel, the eradication of the guinea worm, his support of racial integration in his native South, his green energy initiatives, the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT II), the Carter Center (human rights and election monitoring in over 100 nations), establishing the U.S. Department of Education, Habitat for Humanity and much more. During his 4 year term, not a missile was launched, nor a bomb dropped or bullet fired. You can brew your own beer legally thanks to him. This humble and gracious Sunday School teacher remains on my list of top 5 presidents. Would that I and more of us were failures like him.

Gene Burshuliak