CHAPTER 4

# Finding Our Way Again

## *An Essay on the Carters' Memoir Everything to Gain: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life*

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In Rome, Georgia, about two hundred miles from Plains, where Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter were penning their collaborative memoir after the historic loss to Ronald Reagan, another collaboration was occurring. My elementary school was collecting items for a time capsule. I can't recall everything we placed inside the Folger's coffee tin repurposed from the smoke-filled teacher's lounge, but I do remember a few highlights. Someone suggested the front page of the newspaper announcing New Coke. My brother donated his Rubik's Cube. Another kid made a passionate speech about why a cassette of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* was a requirement. But what I remember most is our sense of import; we were creating a historical record that would explain to the future (or maybe even to an alien who would finally discover us!) what our world was like that spring. And yet, as is often the case in childhood, the sense of import was misplaced.

I seriously doubt that anyone has ever bothered to dig up that Folger's can.

But *Everything to Gain, Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life* by Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter was never buried. It was published in 1987 and widely read. This book, however, has become one of the most insightful time capsules of that era.

As writers, we set intentions when composing our books, but there is so much we can't control. Our books become another thing once they enter a reader's mind. Public perception swivels a book's reception. Then, there

are reviews that swivel perceptions again. Then, the Big Reviews. Or the lack of them. The awards. Or the lack of them. What inevitably follows is a slow fade. We often forget the books we've read. We need to make space in our brains for the next book, the next project that seems so important at the time. Another way to put this is that we tend to obsess on the future. And so, revisiting an old book, especially one written and published in 1987 by a celebrity, can seem beside the point. No longer relevant.

Honestly, I wasn't sure what I would find when I began to read the Carters' collaborative memoir, and I approached the task with some skepticism, like looking through a grandmother's yellowed photo album. I did not think the book would relate to the complicated, extraordinary, harrowing times we live in now.

It's interesting how often I'm wrong.

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One of the first shocks of the book occurs immediately as the writers, Jimmy and Rosalynn, choosing to write in first-person plural, announce: "We live in such remarkable times that it is difficult for us to comprehend the changes that have taken place in our lifetimes."[1] Their use of the word *remarkable* is remarkably different than how this would be used today in 2024 versus when they were writing approximately between 1985 and 1986. They meant "remarkable" in a good way, not how many ads begin now with "during these challenging times." The optimism is shocking and so, too, the facts that support it. "Every day the average life expectancy of Americans increases by seven hours,"[2] write the Carters in the 1980s. In contrast, our life expectancy is at the lowest levels since 1996. What's more, they praise how they have seen their "workday shrink greatly," whereas workdays now seem to infiltrate every waking hour amid the boundless work-from-home setups and the constant connectivity of emails and cell phones. Not to mention the number of Americans who have to work two part-time demanding jobs so that employers can avoid fringe benefits. "A third of all American men over the age of fifty-five no longer work," wrote the Carters in 1987.[3] At first, I thought they meant these men were unemployed. In truth, they were retired, a fact I can't even begin to relate to now.

The Carters provide these initial facts to give context that they, like many Americans, have found themselves retired and in good enough financial and physical health to have to determine how to proceed for this next phase of their lives. While their reasons for early retirement were unique, the Carters' experience is very relatable to that of any recent retiree: the aimlessness, the

questioning of their value, and the hesitation about where to begin. The supposed dilemma this book sets out to resolve is how to effectively optimize the senior years in healthy, meaningful, and productive ways—emotionally, spiritually, and physically. Essentially, how we might retire well. But in the light of the current era, it's far more a book about how to live well.

As the Carters share their grief about the election loss, they detail how they overcame the grief by finding a deeper purpose: to make the world a better place. And in so doing, they present jaw-droppingly stark contrasts between now and then regarding celebrity worship, the behavior of politicians, and the nature of responding to a health crisis. It seems we have become the aliens I had imagined discovering our time capsule back in 1985. We tilt our heads to one side and squint at the Carters' book, confounded by how things were done in this distant land. It is a book that demonstrates just how terribly we have lost our way.

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The first chapter, "Starting Over," is the most vulnerable of all the chapters, describing the pain of the election loss. The second chapter describes their first domestic policy program at the Carter Center, which was to compile a report in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention titled "Closing the Gap." This report would describe "the gap between what Americans are capable of doing and what we are actually doing about preventive health."[4] Their goals were simple and rooted in a deep desire to help others. "We wanted concrete information: what could be done with present knowledge by informed people to avoid becoming victims of the most common killers and cripplers."[5] In the third chapter, "How We Live," the Carters talk about their own health behaviors in relation to the report's findings.

After that, the book begins to shift to describing programs and people who have gone on to help others in significant ways. The fourth chapter provides a fascinating look at the genesis for their relationship with Habitat for Humanity, one of their most high-profile examples of volunteer work. They describe how their involvement was something of a fluke. "On the spur of the moment and half in jest I said, "I'll have to come back and do some volunteer carpenter work."[6] By the time Jimmy Carter returned home, the president of Habitat for Humanity had heard about the offer and called to thank him, mentioning Rosalynn too. "Rosalynn too? I hadn't volunteered her for the task, and I really didn't know whether I really wanted to go or not." What follows is a story about overcoming challenges and embracing

discomfort. On a twenty-five-hour bus journey from Georgia to New York, they sang songs and chatted with the other volunteers. Or rather, Jimmy did. Rosalynn had a speaking engagement that required her to meet them later, but Jimmy admits: "The truth is that if she had a previous engagement, I think she would have invented one" to avoid that journey.[7] Once they all arrived, excited and emboldened, they immediately felt despair when they looked at the fixer-upper: a "bare shell of a building—six stories high with no windows, no doors, no roof, and burned and collapsing floors and ceilings."[8] The professional builders in the group said it could not be done. But Carter did what Carter did: prayed, rallied, and came up with a plan. The chapter ends with not only their success but short profiles of unsung heroes, such as Veronica Maz (founder of House of Ruth for homeless women) and Carol and Jim Howe (founder of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill), whose dreams to help were not deterred by the enormity of the problem.

The next two chapters, "Away from Home" and "We and the World," take a global perspective. The Carters share how they applied their successful domestic programs abroad such as combating infectious diseases and malnutrition as outlined in their "Closing the Gap" report. They also describe working with the Child Survival Task Force, which is a joint effort of national and international organizations to immunize children around the globe. In addition to all of this, they also describe advocating for human rights abroad with different organizations and within the power of his presidential status. Yet they are aware of this privilege and offer ways seniors of little means or influence can help, such as by joining the Peace Corps (as Jimmy's mother did at age seventy!); church sponsored programs; or organizations such as International Executive Service Corps, which is for retired business executives to put their experience and time toward helping the poor in other countries.

In "We Are the World," they share their travel since "retiring" to places such as Japan, Peru, China, and Brazil. This travel, however, was not about relaxation but about educating themselves on the country before they went, fostering real relationships once they arrived, and purposely exerting themselves by doing things like scaling Mt. Everest. As most of the chapters do, they provide ways others can do the same, such as through the Friendship Force program or Elderhostel.

Finally, in the last chapter, "Winding Up," the Carters appear to have come to a healthy and happy life, one that is about making sanguine lifestyle choices, avoiding the consumerist trap, and dedicating one's time to making a positive contribution. And indeed, it has been positive. Carter has arguably

accomplished more post-presidency than any other president we've had. After all, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2002. That's the other time capsule element about reading an old memoir by a celebrity; you know the ending that they have yet to experience.

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I would like to return to the first chapter a bit more in an effort to highlight some of the cultural shifts between the 1980s and now. As mentioned earlier, the first chapter addresses the real pain they felt, described as an "incomprehensible political defeat." Some of this was discussed in Carter's earlier memoir published in 1982 titled *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President*. But this later memoir provides a surprisingly naked account of the feelings—and the different ways Rosalynn and Jimmy processed them. In characteristic fashion of men in the 1980s, Jimmy chose to bottle his emotions. And yet Carter is vulnerable even about that. He writes, "I have always believed that it is a sign of weakness to show emotion by giving in publicly to despair, frustration, or disappointment. Instead of yielding to those pressures, I try to hide my own feelings, to reassure others by emphasizing the positive aspects of the situation, and to pray for strength and wisdom."[9] Rosalynn is clear in her frustration about his reaction: "I would almost have preferred some private wailing and a gnashing of teeth."[10]

It wasn't only a political loss the couple was up against. Shortly after the election, they found out they were not only out of a job but out of money. Jimmy Carter had done what was expected of a president and put all financial affairs in a blind trust. But because of three years of drought in Georgia and business mismanagement, their agribusiness floundered. They were broke. To become solvent again, they would have to sell the entire warehouse and move back to Plains, Georgia, where their house was paid off. Defeated, angry, bewildered, and suddenly poor, they also wondered how they would be able to earn a living.

What's more, their daughter, Amy, did not transition well to Plains. Only two other kids were her age there, so she went on to boarding school in Atlanta at age fourteen. In addition to all their other changes, now they had an unexpected empty nest. They began to jog at the time school let out so they wouldn't have to endure the loud silence of an empty house. Overnight, they went from negotiating peace in the Middle East, nuclear arms control, and promoting human rights to raking four years of leaves from their yard.

Instead of publicly railing against the injustice of the loss, they chose a different path. Reflection, prayer, exercise, working with their hands, and a return to nature:

> We especially enjoyed the luxury of walking through the woods and fields for miles without seeing a single house, or of rarely meeting a car while bicycling or jogging along the back roads. We would stop along the way to visit the farm families who had been our friends and customers before we left home for a political life. . . . We savored the different seasons of nature and gathered wild fruits such as plums, blackberries, mayhaws, grapes, blueberries, and persimmons that grow along or near the rural trails. And having our mothers close by to call or visit every day was a particular joy.[11]

The simple purity of such activities is a reminder of a fact we don't much like to face in our current epoch of quick fixes. Healing takes time, and positive acts of self-care require a certain amount of exertion. This isn't "self-care" in the form of Netflix, Cheetos, and hearting a faux therapist's post on Instagram.

The first chapter is a study not only on how to overcome loss, but also how deeply we have changed regarding our treatment of the famous and influential. At this point, our capitalist system is deeply intertwined in creating and sustaining celebrity worship and identity. To think of the Carters as almost broke baffles me because monetizing one's name is so much a part of the culture. These days, you don't even have to be a former president. Social media allows a person with limited skills and accomplishments as "unboxing" to become an influencer for a profession. And if you are already famous, endorsing products is a cash cow. Consider the Kardashians, who became famous because of elder sister Kim's sex tape. What the sisters command per Instagram post is jaw-dropping. The youngest member, Kylie, earns $1,835,000 per post on Instagram according to HopperHQ. But somehow, it's not enough. It is reported that in 2016, she earned another $18 million endorsing products from Puma, Skims, Calvin Klein, and others.

While Jimmy Carter did not have the opportunity in 1980 to promote a new lip plumping gloss, he did intentionally choose opportunities that aligned with his values, even when doing so hurt him financially. "The day after I was defeated in November of 1980, I met with the press and told them I was . . . not going to utilize my having been president to make money for myself."[12] And he kept to that promise, donating all his lecture fees to the Carter Center, even when the couple was struggling financially. The Carters paid off their debts by selling the family peanut warehouse to the Archer Daniels Midland Company. To earn income, they turned to writing, both

signing contracts to write their memoirs, and Jimmy Carter lectured at Emory, which he called then "a relatively small institution that was eager to improve its academic standing and influence."[13] Today, Jimmy Carter owns three thousand acres—and its timber, which also generates income. Despite all of this, the Carters never moved from their two-bedroom ranch, in which Carter has made most of the furniture himself, including the four-poster walnut bed.

So how do Jimmy Carter's financial choices compare to those of other recent presidents? Ford, who was Carter's immediate predecessor, invested in oil with Marvin Davis, which reportedly provides enough income for not only Ford but all his children. Carter, who vowed to reduce our oil imports by half, would never do such a thing. In retirement, President Bill Clinton's speaking fees in the first ten years earned him more than $40 million, and his book deals put another $12 million in his pocket. Clinton's net worth is now valued at $120 million.[14] The Obamas received 65 million for their book deal in 2017, the largest reported nonfiction deal in US history. While the Obamas entered the White House with a net worth of $1.3 million, it is now estimated between $70 and $135 million. Since leaving office, Barack Obama has been paid as much as $400,000 for a speech, and Michele Obama has commanded $125,000. While they do donate to charity, Forbes estimates $1.1 million was gifted from 2009 to 2015. It would be a significant amount for most of us, but it's only a tiny fraction of what the couple makes every year. The bulk of the income goes to their multiple homes (such as one 6,892-square-foot home in Martha's Vineyard and another 8,200-square-foot mansion in DC) plus lavish vacations. And we don't even need to get into President Trump. The contrast is stark. I don't share these facts as an admonishment of these presidents, but more as an acknowledgment of a culture that produces such opportunities for the rich rather than the needy.

As balanced and healthy as their financial and lifestyle choices were, the Carters wanted more—and it wasn't more for themselves. As explained in *Everything to Gain*, they write: "There was still a crucial something missing: an opportunity for service that has been so much a factor in our political lives."[15] They were also acutely aware of how Reagan was undoing their valued work, such as repealing most of Rosalynn's signature creation: the Mental Health Systems Act, which funded community mental health centers for low-income populations. Reagan also overturned Carter's executive order to forbid US companies from dumping banned pharmaceuticals; pesticides; and goods, such as a flame retardant, on children's clothes known to contribute to cancer, onto developing nations. All of that combined with beefing up the

military budget and bomb production signaled to the Carters that they must continue their work. But how?

Soon after they had left office, Rosalynn woke one night to find Jimmy, who was usually such a sound sleeper, ram-rod stiff and upright in bed. "I know what we can do at the library. . . . We can develop a place to help people who want to resolve disputes. There is no place like that now. If two countries really want to work something out, they don't want to go to the United Nations and get one hundred fifty other countries involved."[16] The presidential library, which ex-presidents are required to raise the money for (a job that President Ford described as his worst ever), had been dogging Jimmy Carter. He always knew what he didn't want his presidential library to be a "monument" to himself. "Rather, he wanted it to be our fight to the people of our country in appreciation for receiving such a high political honor," Rosalynn explains.[17] Now, he had some specifics of what that would look like.

The Carters recovered from their loss not only by making financial choices that aligned with their values but also by using the pain of defeat to make the world a better place. I cannot help but think of the contrasts to other former presidents in this regard, specifically Donald Trump. Unable to accept his 2020 loss, Trump instigated an insurrection and fundraised 250 million for an "election defense fund" that did not actually exist.[18] Also, Trump and others filed and lost sixty-two lawsuits contesting election processes, vote counting, and the vote certification process in nine states. Nearly all the suits were dismissed or dropped due to lack of evidence. What makes all this worse is the percentage of Americans who find what Trump is doing acceptable as seen in Trump's poll numbers against Biden for 2024. Improving the world, rather than inflating his ego, has been the definition of Carter's post-presidency.

The Carters' eschewal of self-aggrandizement and disinterest in self-promotion led them to a deep sense of collaboration. After all, this book is written in first-person plural, which is a unique point of view. Often, a move like this feels experimental, but not here. This is a choice that runs deep. They are sharing *their* thoughts and experiences yet are quick to kindly relay when their interpretations differ such as how they processed the election defeat. The first-person plural works surprisingly well, but then again, perhaps that should not be a surprise. If one thinks about it, the Carters' lives exist in a collaborative, collective mindset. For example, Carter's interest in conflict theory is inherently collaborative. Plus, multiple examples abound of his working with other politicians, like Ford, who are from differing parties. First-person plural was perhaps the only choice for this book.

One of the areas that struck me most was the collaborative approach to health care in the past compared to what we have recently experienced in the United States during COVID: the unrestrained conspiracy theories, the increase in verbal and physical aggressions, and the general lack of communal spirit toward the common good. During Carter's term as president, he vowed to eliminate measles through vaccinations. I wanted a sense of how daunting this task was and found this article from the CDC dating back to May 1982: "In 1977, approximately 20 million of the 50 million persons in the United States who were 15 years old were estimated to need at least 1 dose of 1 vaccine in order to be considered fully protected against the 7 diseases for which vaccines are routinely administered in childhood—i.e., diphtheria, measles, mumps, pertussis, poliomyelitis, rubella, and tetanus." By the end of Carter's presidency, he had vaccinated almost 90 percent of all children. As a child myself during that time period, I don't remember anything about the shot except for imagining how big of a treat I could harangue from my mother after getting it. (It was an ice cream cone. Baskin Robbins. Orange sherbet.) There was no discussion about whether or not any of us would get the vaccination. Of course, all credit doesn't go to Carter himself. Perhaps part of the reason for compliance, even excitement, is that adults had directly experienced those diseases in one way or another, and thus, they wanted to do anything to be rid of them for their children.

It wasn't just an anomaly for the 1980s though. A belief in community good over personal comfort seemed more ingrained than now, especially with how the Carters describe it. The Carters narrate growing up in rural Georgia where "health problems drew our community together."[19] They describe how when a neighbor would be seriously ill, people would "join family members in something like a death watch as the crisis approached. Cars, buggies, and wagons would be parked around the home as everyone prayed."[20] Although the Carters could not have imagined a post-COVID world, they nonetheless offer wisdom regarding public health. They remember intimately, and share many examples of, how lethal a common sickness could be. Double pneumonia often meant death. Strep throat killed a forty-five-year-old mother of two that they knew. Rabid dogs, too, often terrorized and infected families. "So great was the concern about disease in Plains that as soon as a remedy was identified, the entire community would rally with the utmost dedication to purify our water, eliminate mosquito-breeding places, reduce the rat population, eliminate wild dogs, and inoculate our own animals."[21] It's much more common now to simply spray for mosquitos rather than cleaning up one's yard. Are those of us who are healthy and able in the United States just

too spoiled? Too cut off from one another? Too many isolated pods, stuck in cycles of rumination, financial pursuits, personal accolades, only landing for indulgent breaks justified because of our stress?

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Whereas the first four chapters focus on the response to the election defeat and their plans to make a difference, the end of the book covers something a bit different: travel as a way to improve the self and improve relations between countries—not about tuning out as so many vacations are now. With the single exception of the Carter family Christmas trip, the types of travel the Carters recommend is about educating oneself regarding another country's culture, history, and people. When they visit other countries, the Carters usually have a goal in mind, whether it is to learn about traditional farming practices or ridding an area of disease. But they are also keenly aware that with every trip, they must push themselves to do something different. "Whether it is the awkwardness of trying to twist our tongues around a new language or the physical challenge of keeping our bodies in shape, we have lost some of our youthful self-consciousness."[22] Here, they suggest how *not* being young is an asset to traveling, for experience has shown them what real struggle is like. For the average senior without diplomatic ties, they recommend exchanges where one stays in the host's house, such as church outreach programs, Sister Cities, and Partners of America. And if travel is out of the question, they suggest hosting someone as a way to get to help another and help oneself.

How they explain travel reminds me of when I was in fourth grade and the teacher assigned us pen pals. I still remember how excited I was when I received a letter from the girl far, far away—in the exotic state of Washington. She told me she could see Mount Rainier from her house, and I remember looking out at the school window at the cow fields, flat except for their refuse, and thinking: they must be magnificent. What's more, I kept asking anyone who would listen if they knew how far the state of Washington was from Georgia. No, they did not. But I did: 2,700 miles, which would take approximately forty hours to drive without stopping. It felt like an impossible distance. But now, partly because of my age and partly because of globalism, it is just another place on my iPhone list to visit. In just one day, my Evernote account had a log-in from Russia (not good); someone in Ukraine messaged me to say he liked one of my poems (sweet!); and 23 and Me informed me I have twelve new cousins (of which I don't even bother to review). Once again, Carter reminds us of what travel used to be like for the

middle class: something rare that one would savor and plan for months or years in advance. Now, trips with social exchange components seem reserved for college students. Adults assert their adultness by grabbing all-inclusive deals on Travel Zoo where the most cultural exchange they will encounter is meeting other Americans from different states, everyone equally sweetened by the frozen daiquiris.

Another difference with their travel is that the Carters considered the taxpayers' cost with their trips and would cancel or rearrange to avoid being a burden, such as when Rosalynn wanted to visit Machu Picchu but canceled that due to the required use of US helicopters to do so. In contrast, while Trump was in office, he took 550 trips to his properties alone (and spent a quarter of his days golfing), mainly Mar-a-Lago, which cost taxpayers two million in security detail.[23] Worse, Trump has charged the security personnel at his properties "as much as $1,185 per night, more than five times the recommended government rate, and the high rates continued after he left office."[24]

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As the Carters wrap up their book, they presciently say: "In today's world . . . we have become more isolated, more impersonal in our relationships, and perhaps less sensitive to the needs and pain of others."[25] In an era when the US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy has called loneliness a health epidemic and when approximately two mass shootings occur every day in the United States alone, these concerns have slid into crises. Yet *Everything to Gain* reminds us of how that does not need to be the case. There are other ways. There have been other ways. The Carters lived them.

The Carters conclude their book by reminding us that growing up during the Depression contributed greatly to their collaborative, communal approach to living:

> On a farm or in a small rural community during the Depression years, it was impossible to live a life of isolation from our neighbors. We shared almost everything, including a lot of knowledge about specific skills. For example, if something was broken, we usually had to fix it ourselves. With time off from work, we also shared sports, games, hunting, fishing, and the visits of friends and relatives. Much of what we do now comes from that background.[26]

And much of what we could learn from them also comes from that background.

It is interesting how mutable intention is. The Carters' intention when composing their book has not changed, as far this reader knows. Yet the value of the book—and what a contemporary reader can gain from it is different from the intentions in the 1980s. What might that suggest about authorship? About the role of the reader? I see such mutability as a testament to the power of literature. Literary value comes from areas unimagined to author, reader, and publisher. Yet trying to determine what is of value, what should be valued, and what is value itself is an inherent consideration of authors, literary critics, editors, publishers, and marketers who are constantly trying to determine that, partly in an effort to avoid financial loss, time, pride, and some combination of all. Yet this book shows how literature is not quantifiable and predetermined. The construction of a book is as complicated as the construction of identity. In essence, writing and producing a meaningful or successful book is one of the greatest mysteries. And there is such beauty in not knowing. Of being pleasantly wrong time and time again.

## Notes

1. Carter, Jimmy, and Rosalynn Carter, *Everything to Gain: Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life* (New York: Random House, 1987), xiiv.
2. Carter and Carter, xiiv.
3. Carter and Carter, xiiv.
4. Carter and Carter, 37.
5. Carter and Carter, 37.
6. Carter and Carter, 92.
7. Carter and Carter, 93.
8. Carter and Carter, 93.
9. Carter and Carter, 7.
10. Carter and Carter, 7.
11. Carter and Carter, 21.
12. Sarah Rimer, "Enjoying the Ex-Presidency? Never Been Better," *The New York Times*, February 16, 2000, https://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/16/jobs/enjoying-the-ex-presidency-never-been-better.html.
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14. Bill McGinty, "Here's How Much Taxpayers Spend to Support Former Presidents," modified January 19, 2021, WCNC, https://www.wcnc.com/article/money/what-taxpayers-spend-support-ex-presidents/275-ee0205f2-1def-4564-8e31-2a0e78aa92f3.
15. Carter and Carter, *Everything to Gain*, 32.
16. Carter and Carter, 29.

17. Carter and Carter, 29.

18. Hugo Lowell, "Trump's Raising of $250M for Fund That 'Did Not Exist' Suggests Possible Fraud," *The Guardian*, June 15, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jun/15/capitol-attack-panel-trump-election-defense-fund.

19. Carter and Carter, *Everything to Gain*, 43.

20. Carter and Carter, 43.

21. Carter and Carter, 44.

22. Carter and Carter, 158.

23. Jordan Libowitz and Caitlin Moniz, "The Secret Service Spent Nearly $2 Million at Trump Properties," CREW, modified August 16, 2023, https://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-investigations/the-secret-service-spent-nearly-2-million-at-trump-properties/#:~:text=The%20Secret%20Service%20has%20spent,obtained%20and%20analyzed%20by%20CREW.

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25. Carter and Carter, 192.

26. Carter and Carter, 194.