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The "Equal Partner": The Ritualized Remembrance of First Lady Rosalynn Carter

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In this essay, I argue the mainstream press rhetorically constructs a public memory artifact through their eulogizing of national figures, which I have called "ritualized remembrance." Examining news texts after the death of former First Lady Rosalynn Carter in November of 2023, I unpack the overarching narrative of Carter as an "equal partner." As a memory artifact, ritualized remembrance brings to the forefront how and why a society might eulogize a person, institution, or even a place, to address current and/or future needs. While ostensibly progressive, I suggest the media discourse's singular emphasis on "equal partner" instead tethers Carter's identity to that of her husband, impeding the first lady's public memory as a site of agency, while quietly quelling current anxieties surrounding marriage, individualism, and feminism.

Keywords: *First Ladies, public memory, eulogy, gender, politics*

On November 19, 2023, former First Lady Rosalynn Smith Carter passed away at her home in Plains, Georgia, at age 96. Mainstream media reports of her death were quick to mention her peaceful passing, family support, and long marriage to former President Jimmy Carter, who died December 29, 2024, at age 100. Indeed, Rosalynn's 77-year marriage to Jimmy was notable not only because of its sheer length, but also because it became a key building block in the media's discourse eulogizing Rosalynn's life. As the *New York Times* reported, Rosalynn was "a true life partner to Jimmy Carter who helped propel him from rural Georgia to the White House."[1] *CBS News* reminisced that "the Carters celebrated their 77th wedding anniversary this summer, and by then had already been the longest-married presidential couple in United States history for some time."[2] *Reuters* cited Jimmy Carter himself, noting, "Former U.S. first lady Rosalynn Carter, who President Jimmy Carter called 'an extension of myself' owing to his wife's prominent role in his administration even as she tirelessly promoted the cause of mental health, died on Sunday."[3] Numerous other mainstream outlets—*Politico, NPR, , The Hill, Newsweek*, *ABC News*, *Fox News*—all began their coverage with a statement released by former President Carter, which drew upon a

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[1] Katharine Q. Seelye, "Rosalynn Carter, First Lady and a Political Partner, Dies at 96," *New York Times*, November 19, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/19/us/politics/rosalynn-carter-dead.html

[2] Emily Mae Czachor, "Jimmy Carter's last moments with Rosalynn Carter, his partner of almost eight decades," *CBS News*, November 28, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jimmy-carter-rosalynn-carter-death-last-moments-together-wife-77-years/

[3] William Dunham, "Former US first lady Rosalynn Carter dies at 96," Reuters, November 19, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/us/former-us-first-lady-rosalynn-carter-dies-96-2023-11-19/

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similar theme: "Rosalynn was my equal partner in everything I ever accomplished," President Carter said. "She gave me wise guidance and encouragement when I needed it. As long as Rosalynn was in the world, I always knew somebody loved and supported me."[4]

The mainstream media's rhetoric surrounding Rosalynn Carter's passing offers the opportunity to investigate how legacies of public figures, and in this case, the institution of the First Lady, shape our public memory via news texts. This study also provides insight into how society currently understands modern "womanhood" in the public sphere. Over the past decade women have been making gains (albeit incomplete ones) in politics.[5] Milestones include Hillary Clinton's major party nomination in 2016, Kamala Harris's appointment as Vice President in 2021, a record number of women in Congress, and even Nikki Haley's challenge to former President Donald Trump in the 2024 Republican primaries.[6] At the same time, the role of First Lady—an enduring "barometer" for women's standing in US society—has experienced varying levels of absence and ambivalence.[7] After Michelle Obama's history-making run as the first Black First Lady and widely successful East Wing campaigns, Melania Trump was notably absent in this role.[8] She broke precedent and spent the first five months of Trump's first administration living in New York, and ultimately struggled to get an East Wing initiative off the ground.[9] Dr. Jill Biden likewise approached the role in curious ways. Along with being the first First Lady to simultaneously hold a job outside the role, she also spearheaded her advocacy under the presidential umbrella instead of from the East Wing.[10] Though not definitive, these fluctuations point to a shifting focus on the role of First Lady specifically, and as such women's roles more generally.[11]

Following her death on November 19 and leading up to her funeral on November 29, national and local press outlets across the political and educational spectrum reported on the passing of First Lady Rosalynn Carter. The texts I am most interested in for this study are those reaching the widest audiences from the mainstream media, regardless of political bias, and in particular, coverage that went beyond reporting on her death itself and offered remembrance of Carter's life. Through my analysis, I argue the mainstream press constructs a "ritualized remembrance" of the institution of First Lady. I coin the term "ritualized remembrance" to signify the process by which the ephemeral act of eulogizing manifests as a public memory through media texts. Specifically,

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[4] "Former First Lady Rosalynn Carter Passes Away at Age 96," Carter Center Website, November 19, 2023, https://www.cartercenter.org/news/pr/2023/statement-rosalynn-carter-111923.html

[5] Katherine Schaeffer, "The Data on Women Leaders," Pew Research Center, September 27, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/fact-sheet/the-data-on-women-leaders/; "Press release: Women in politics: New data shows growth but also setbacks," UN Women, March 10, 2021, https://www.un-women.org/en/news/stories/2021/3/press-release-women-in-politics-new-data-shows-growth-but-also-setbacks

[6] "Nikki Haley suspends her presidential campaign, but doesn't endorse Trump," *NPR*, March 6, 2024, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1228580178

[7] Wertheimer, *"Editors Introduction,"* p. x-xi; Karrin Vasby Anderson, "The First Lady: A Site of "American Womanhood,"" in *Leading Ladies of the White House: Communication Strategies of Notable Twentieth-Century First Ladies,* ed. Molly J. Wertheimer (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2005): 1-15.

[8] "First Lady Michelle Obama," The White House, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/administration/first-lady-michelle-obama; Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Melania Trump's Absence From Washington Raises Questions About Her Role, *New York Times*, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/02/us/politics/melania-trump-first-lady.html

[9] Darlene Superville, "Melania Trump, son Barron move into White House, *Associated Press*, June 11, 2017, https://apnews.com/article/18559a4fb97d454b935f663f2db9ba69; Kate Bennett, "Melania Trump's 'Be Best' falls short of goals at 2nd year mark," *CNN Politics*, May 7, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/07/politics/melania-trump-be-best-anniversary/index.html

[10] "Dr. Jill Biden," The White House, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/administration/dr-jill-biden/

[11] Lisa Burns, *First Ladies and the Fourth Estate: Press Framing of Presidential Wives*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press (2008), p. 6.

the traceable, archival quality of media articles that reconstruct a narrative about the life of a nationally known figure create a shared recollection of the past that informs and instructs present and future needs.[12] This concept is useful in considering how media eulogizing contributes to the public memory of a larger community, culture, or institution. I contend the press's rhetoric constructs the former First Lady through the lens of "equal partner." While ostensibly progressive, this discourse instead tethers Carter's identity to that of her husband, impeding the First Lady's public memory as a site of agency, while quietly quelling current anxieties surrounding marriage, individualism, and feminism.

This essay unfolds in three moves. First, I trace the intersection of public memory, First Ladies, and the eulogistic form to suggest the press coverage of Rosalynn Carter constitutes what I am calling "ritualized remembrance." Second, I apply this framework to the mainstream coverage of Rosalynn Carter's passing and memory to reveal how the narrative of "equal partnership" contributes to a public memory of the First Lady that feels satisfying but is ultimately restrictive. Finally, I offer some implications of ritualized remembrance writ large, and for the First Lady institution specifically.

Public Memory and the Press

Writing recently for the *Contemporary Journal of Rhetoric*, John H. Saunders defined public memory as "the rhetorical construction and circulation of a collectively shared sense of the past through symbolic and material supports, situated and uniformed to serve the needs and interests of the present."[13] Rhetoricians, in particular, have focused on unpacking the appeals used in these memory texts to learn about how we maintain and project our past, present, and future.[14] In this essay, I attend to the memory text constructed by the mainstream media's eulogizing of Rosalynn Carter to explore how her legacy was reconstructed to serve present and future needs. Though eulogies in the traditional sense are indeed ephemeral, oral events—those crafted and shared through the mainstream media—become digital, archival, memory artifacts. As Ekaterina Haskins notes, although traditional and modern memory often relies on physical artifacts and places to mark its existence, the advent of online and digitized memory, including the publishing and archiving of news media, accommodates infinite artifacts that are both traceable and rapidly obsolete.[15]

The study of US public memory has grown significantly over the last thirty years but remains grounded in several foundational assumptions.[16] Namely, public memory is visible, often

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[12] Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, "Spaces of Remembering and Forgetting: The Reverent Eye/I at the Plains Indian Museum," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (2006): 27-47; Ekaterina Haskins, "Between Archive and Participation: Public Memory in a Digital Age," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly,* no. 37 (2007): 401-422; Barbie Zelizer, "Reading the past against the grain: The shape of memory studies." *Critical studies in Mass Communication*, no. 12 (1995): 214-214.

[13] John H. Saunders, "The Pulse of Public Memory," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 12, no.3 (2022), p. 112.

[14] See for example Greg Dickinson, Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, "Spaces," 27-47.

[15] See Haskins, "*Between*," 401-422.

[16] See Saunders, *"Pulse,"* 113-114; Kendall R. Phillips, "The failure of memory: Reflections on rhetoric and public remembrance," *Western Journal of Communication*, no.*74* (2010): 208-223; Tasha N. Dubriwny and Kristan Poirot, "Gender and public memory," *Southern Communication Journal* no. 82.4 (2017): 199-202. https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2017.1332448; Barbie Zelizer, "Reading the past against the grain: The shape of memory studies." *Critical studies in Mass Communication*, no. 12 (1995): 214-214;

located in places—museums, monuments, and memorials—that are accessible to the public.[17] Importantly, scholars agree that these collective memories are always partial; as choices about what, who, and how to remember are made, memory is pieced together, privileging one interpretation of the past over others.[18] These choices tend to favor dominant, mainstream narratives that embody "American identity" premised mostly on white, heterosexual, cisgender, male accounts.[19] More recently, scholars have begun to widen both scope and methodologies, identifying oppositional memory practices, or those that challenge the status quo or attempt to re-envision existing memories.[20] Finally, separating it from individual memory, *public* memory draws upon material support, such as artifacts, objects, narratives, even trends and routines, that mark its existence in the physical world. As Barbie Zelizer states, "In between one's head and the world . . . is a repertoire of different agents of mediation—media that helps us to remember."[21] While many scholars have taken seriously the visual turn in rhetorical studies and sought to examine space, place, and visual imagery, perhaps the most frequently produced "text" of public memory resides in our mainstream media.[22]

Like museums and other physical sites of memory, media texts rely on narratives to communicate to their readers "the qualities, the pleasures or pain, the duties, the kind of past, present and/or future that is desired."[23] They use storytelling techniques that embellish, reposition, and even remove details from the events they are crafting for public consumption.[24] As Eyal Zandberg and colleagues recognize, "Media research acknowledges the similarity between the process of shaping collective memory and journalistic practice. Journalists choose which stories or facts have importance. They select facts, construct them into cultural-interpretative frames, and thus give them meaning. In summary, journalists 'lean' on the past in order to give meaning to the present."[25] Additionally, because journalism requires writing that is both condensed and organized, it also relies on conventions like press framing to convey meaning succinctly. Frames are organized by

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[17] John E. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the twentieth century*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994.

[18] See Zelizer, *"Reading the past,"* 214-214; Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, & Brian L. Ott, "Introduction: Rhetoric/Memory/Place," in *Places of Public Memory* eds. Carole Blair, Greg Dickinson, & Brian L. Ott, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2010): 1-54.

[19] Dubriwny and Poirot, *"Gender,"* 199-202.

[20] See Ryan Erik McGeough, Catherine Helen Palczewski, and Randall A. Lake. "Oppositional memory practices: US memorial spaces as arguments over public memory," *Argumentation and Advocacy*, no. 51.4 (2015): 231-254. https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2015.11821852; Jennifer Keohane, "Home/Work: The Rhetoricity of Commemorative Labor at the Belmont-Paul House." *Western Journal of Communication*, no. 87.1 (2023): 130-149. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2022.2109722

[21] Zelizer, *"Reading the past,"* 232.

[22] See Andreas Huyssen, "Present pasts: Media, politics, amnesia," *Public culture*, no. 12.1 (2000): 21-38; Zelizer, *"Reading the past"* 232.

[23] Victoria Gallagher and Kenneth S. Zagacki, "Visibility and rhetoric: The power of visual images in Norman Rockwell's depictions of civil rights" *Quarterly Journal of Speech, no.* 91.2 (2005): 195. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630500291448

[24] Urszula Maria Pruchniewska, "'A Crash Course in Herstory": Remembering the Women's Movement in MAKERS: Women Who Make America," *Southern Communication Journal*, no. 82.4 (2017): 228-238. https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2017.1332089

[25] Eyal Zandberg, Oren Meyers, and Motti Neiger, "Past continuous: Newsworthiness and the shaping of collective memory," *Critical Studies in Media Communication,* no. 29.1 (2012): 7. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2011.647042

drawing upon existing knowledge of readers to explain and categorize new information.[26] Likewise, frames influence how a story is interpreted by its readers (e.g., through common lenses like competition, gender, or good vs. evil). As such, journalists play a major role in the creation of US public memory through their use of frames and storytelling as they create the "symbolic bridges" between past and present that help reflect society's values, beliefs, and attitudes.[27] The turning of otherwise momentary news events into cultural touchpoints can be thought of as a "media ritual." Nick Couldry defines media rituals as those actions "organized around key media related categories and boundaries, whose performance reinforces, indeed helps legitimate, the underlying 'value' expressed in the idea that the media is our access point to our social centre."[28] In anthropology, rituals consist of habitual, formalized actions that involve transcendent values. Likewise, rituals often appear to create a societal sense of connectedness that naturalizes social order.[29] While Couldry examines where and how power structures exist and perpetuate ritual, I intend to draw attention to the ways in which these mechanisms of ritual work to transform short-lived media discourse into a stable sense of public memory; I do so by looking at one type of news discourse—eulogy—and then apply that lens more specifically to the media coverage of Rosalynn Carter's passing. In line with Couldry's call to demystify the media's role in the reification of existing social norms, I will also examine how ritualized remembrance persuasively naturalizes history for today's consumption in a way that seems linear and logical.

Ritualized Remembrance: Public Eulogizing as Public Memory

Public eulogies found in the media after the death of a national figure observe the tenets of ritual as outlined above: They are habitual, formalized, and involve transcendent values. Relying on the eulogistic form and the basics of journalism, public eulogies function as persuasive building blocks of our public memory. In particular, they offer the exigence to actively "remember" the past in a way that serves present needs, answering the question of who "we" are in relation to the loss, and emphasizing the communal nature of death and memory in society.[30] In these ways, they constitute a public memory artifact, as outlined in more detail below.[31]

First, as a habitually occurring event, eulogies are discourses brought forth by the death of a community member to commemorate the dead and console the grieved. The death of any individual creates the exigence for a eulogy—a symbolic response to the death.[32] In their work on presidential rhetoric, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson argue there is a heightened need for a eulogy upon the death of a president; however, celebrity death more generally has evolved into a cultural and mediated phenomenon.[33] In their work on celebrity and social mediated death, Burgess and colleagues draw on Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* to explicate how eulogy

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[26] Burns, *"First Ladies,"* 7-8.
[27] *Ibid*, 9
[28] Nick Couldry, "Media rituals: beyond functionalism," *The London School of Economics and Political Science: LSE Research Online,* (2005): 2.
[29] *Ibid, 2-3*.
[30] James Martin, "Rhetoric, death, and the politics of memory," *Critical Discourse Studies*, no. 20.5 (2023): 477-490. https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2022.2090977
[31] Zelizer, "Reading the past," 232
[32] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds done in words: Presidential rhetoric and the genres of* governance, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990): 37.
[33] *Ibid,* 37-38; Jean Burgess, Peta Mitchell, and Felix Victor Münch, "Social media rituals: The uses of celebrity death in digital culture," in Ed. Zizi Papacharissi, *A networked self and birth, life, death* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019): 224-239.

and social media collide in an act of social networking. Likewise, they help connect media ritual to the eulogy, noting that "the concept of the media ritual helps to further enrich our understanding of social media's role in the cultural practices surrounding celebrity death."[34] In doing so, the authors recognize the "iterative negotiation and struggle over how society should be constituted and how we want to live in it," highlighting the connectedness of eulogy and the tenets of public memory.[35]

Second, no matter who is authoring a public eulogy, there is a template that keeps the ritual formalized. In Western culture, the eulogy tends to follow the basic template of the following: Acknowledge the death, transform the relationship between living and dead from present to past tense, ease the mortality of mourners, discuss how the dead lives on, and reknit the fabric of the community. Additionally, as George Kennedy notes, as a type of epideictic (ceremonial) rhetoric, a eulogy is given in praise of the dead.[36] This is important for two reasons. First, the eulogy need not rely on traditional forms of argument (e.g., logical appeals) but rather draws upon narrative and communal values to praise. Combined with the eulogistic template, this praise can seem factual but is instead a narrative crafted by the person authoring the eulogy. As Cristina Pepe notes, eulogists represent the community as a spokesperson.[37] In a public eulogy, a journalist relies on the techniques of their genre: framing, witnessing, first-hand accounts, etc., which all work to legitimize their "version" of history and our relationship to it. In sum, eulogies do not necessarily make intellectual claims or demand their audiences weigh evidence carefully to reach conclusions.[38] "Instead, ceremonial speeches often have a 'ritual' function of affirming a common feeling or sentiment, typically through praise, about the immediate moment."[39]

Finally, eulogies draw upon transcendent values. Amos Kiewe argues that inherent in the eulogy is the need to seek "enduring presence located in an audience member's memory," while "prominent individuals seek presence in a community's myth and narrative."[40] To achieve this, eulogies draw attention to "noble acts" to create a sense of community.[41] As part of the epideictic genre, eulogies celebrate the deeds of community exemplars, pointing to those who guided public and communal life, and in doing so, exemplify the best of society's qualities.[42] Through narration of their lives, virtues are proven and show us how to live, and political objectives are achieved without an overtly partisan agenda. Thus, eulogistic proofs cement our public memory not through well-tailored arguments, but through vivid stories, characters, and plotlines which guide, motivate, and educate us on what is to be desired. For these reasons, public eulogizing is well situated to contribute to our national memory landscape and, importantly, affect how power and influence is constructed through our institutions, including the First Ladyship.

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[34] Burgess, "*Social media*," 10.
[35] James Carey, *Communication as culture: Essays on media and culture*, London: Unwin Hyman (1989).
[36] George Kennedy, "The genres of rhetoric," in *Handbook of classical rhetoric in the Hellenistic period* (*330 BC-AD 400),* ed. Stanley E. Porter, (Leiden: Brill, 1997): 43-50.
[37] Cristina Pepe, "Civic Eulogy in Epitaphios of Pericles and Citywide Prayer Service of Rudy Giuliani," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric*, no. 10 (2007): 131-144.
[38] Martin, *"Rhetoric,"* 482.
[39] *Ibid,* 482; Michael F. Carter, "The ritual function of epideictic rhetoric: The case of Socrates' funeral oration," *Rhetorica*, no. 9 (1991): 209–232. https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.1991.9.3.209
[40] Amos Kiewe, "Framing memory through eulogy: Ronald Reagan's long good-bye," in *Framing public memory*, ed. Kendall R. Phillips (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004), 250.
[41] *Ibid*, 250.
[42] Kiewe, *"Framing,"* 250-251.

Remember the (First) Ladies

Interest in the First Lady role has flourished into a well-regarded area of study, with scholars from various disciplines helping provide nuance and understanding to the role and the women who fill it. With national visibility and "celebrity-like" status, the first lady serves as a symbol of US womanhood.[43] Over the years, several frameworks have helped us understand the complexities of this role. For example, Molly Wertheimer advocates that each First Lady must "invent" a public persona from which to address multiple audiences.[44] Shaw Parry-Giles and Diane Blair map the rise of the rhetorical First Lady, contextualizing her public and political performances within the appropriate gender ideology.[45] Karrin Vasby Anderson argues that First Ladies have achieved significant political agency from within traditional norms of femininity by "cultivating" a "'social' political style."[46] All of these perspectives have culminated in an understanding that the First Lady role is a paradox, at once both a site of traditional femininity and also feminist achievement. Although the role of First Lady is not typically characterized as inherently "progressive" or "feminist," integral to the scholarship on First Ladies is the assumption that it serves as a "site of women's agency" showcasing practical strategies for increasing women's voices amidst traditional gender constraints, and helps make visible the influential private sphere and value of social politicking.[47] Perhaps most importantly, it offers a visible paradox: the heterogeneity of women on a national stage as "potential correctives to the double binds faced by all women."[48]

In considering how we remember the role in our physical sites of commemoration, the outlook is less encouraging. Jennifer Keohane argues that a "rhetoric of glamour" pervades the Smithsonian's exhibit on First Ladies, emphasizing perfection and mystery while depoliticizing the women who have exerted power and influence while in the role.[49] Sara Kitsch's investigation of the Smithsonian's exhibit, as well as several presidential museums, argues that a visual narrative of containment casts First Ladies as "outsiders," a threat to be contained.[50] Additionally, a close reading of the US Mint's First Spouse Gold Coin series showcased general ambivalence towards the First Lady role, prioritizing private relationships over the role's public duties and conflating women's activism.[51] This trend isn't surprising given what we know about women's commemoration more generally. As Kristan Poirot and Tasha N. Dubriwny argue in their special issue on gender and public memory, "The embodiment of the American identity in commemorative sites

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[43] Anderson, "The First Lady," 1-15.
[44] Wertheimer, *"Editors Introduction,"* p. x-xi.
[45] Shawn J Parry-Giles and Diane M. Blair, "The rise of the rhetorical first lady: Politics, gender ideology, and women's voice, 1789-2002," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* no. 5, (2002): 565-599.
[46] Anderson, *"The First Lady,"* 6.
[47] *Ibid,* 6-7.
[48] See Ibid, 11-12; Edith P. Mayo, "Party politics: the political impact of the first ladies' social role." *The social science journal*, no. 37, (2000): 577-590.
[49] Jennifer Keohane, "The Most Important Dress in the Country": The Rhetoric of Glamour in the Smithsonian's "The First Ladies." *Women's studies in communication*, no. 40, (2017): 270-288. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2017.1346531
[50] Sara Rae Kitsch, "The contained citizen: first ladies, public memory, and the rhetoric of visual containment," *Communication quarterly,* no.68, (2020): 138-160. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2019.1709089
[51] Kitsch, Sara R. "Minting public memory: substitution logics and gendered commemoration in the first spouse coin." *Women's studies in communication* 40.4 (2017): 419-439. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2017.1373717

is, more often than not, a white heterosexual cisgendered male, reaffirming the 'great man' perspective that dominated American historiography for too long."[52]

Rosalynn Carter: The Equal Partner

Beyond physical sites of public memory, the press coverage of First Ladies offers an overlooked opportunity to learn about how the institution is being remembered. In my analysis, I attend to how Rosalynn Carter's passing provides the exigence for a public memory artifact I have called "ritualized remembrance." By this term, I mean the eulogistic narratives crafted by the media that tell us not only about the individual but their role and/or legacy. Specifically, I argue the ritualized remembrance of Rosalynn Carter draws upon the lens of "equal partner" to construct her memory as a former First Lady. By all accounts, Carter was intentionally active in this role, credited with expanding it in a way that was both personal and fitting of her cultural milieu. Although "equal partner" at first glance reads positive, if not progressive, I argue it instead insinuates her identity *cannot* be untethered from that of her husband. At the same time, the lens of "equal partnership" speaks to present day concerns surrounding marriage, individualism, and the state of gender equality. Ultimately, I contend that the First Lady institution is not being remembered in a way that highlights women's agency.

I unpack the coverage of Carter's passing through rhetorical analysis. My analysis is grounded in the mainstream press coverage following Carter's death on November 19, 2023, and spanning until just after her funeral on November 29, 2023. I chose news coverage that is easily accessible to multiple publics—through multiple media outlets, both partisan and nonpartisan—where most citizens would go to learn about and/or encounter this news. In considering the importance of attending to these memory texts, Phillips writes:

> Rhetoric, as an art of crafting public sentiment, becomes the primary actor in establishing these mechanisms of recollection in this process of caring for the representation of the past. Rhetorical appeals serve to frame memories within established cultural forms that, in turn, establish enthymematic connections. Assuming the success of these connections then the memory of some past event becomes stabilized, indeed reified, into fixed forms that present themselves as necessary and 'true.'[53]

In doing so, I also explore how Carter's ritualized remembrance contributes to our memory of the First Lady institution.

I want to be clear that in critiquing the lens of "equal partner" I am not in any way discrediting or disparaging the Carters' personal relationship or marriage, nor am I discounting the achievements made by the Carters through their joint endeavors. I am, however, suggesting another layer of antecedent ethos that contains the First Lady role, no matter how political or progressive the individual woman is.[54] Until full political equality is achieved, we must remain vigilant in unpacking the mechanisms by which progress is veneered and easily consumed by the status quo.

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[52] Tasha N. Dubriwny and Kristan Poirot, "Gender and public memory," *Southern Communication Journal*, no. 82, (2017): 199. https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2017.1332448

[53] Kendell Phillips, "Introduction," In *Framing Public Memory,* (Ed). Kendall R. Phillips, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004): 218

[54] Sara R. Kitsch and Robert S. Hinck, "Hillary Rodham Clinton Negotiates Gender in the Debates of 2016," in *Televised Presidential Debates in a Changing Media Environment,* ed. Edward A. Hinck, (Prager, 2018): 255-256.

The Many Appeals of an Equal Partnership

The ritualized remembrance of Rosalynn Carter, following her passing in November 2023, was organized around the transcendent value of "equal partnership," which was discussed in all mainstream coverage of her passing. Ostensibly, Rosalynn and Jimmy's "equal partnership" seems noteworthy for its sheer goodness. The Carters forged a partnership through marriage that led to quantifiable good in the world. Their post-presidency work alone led to monumental gains like the eradication of Guinea worm disease, increased village-based healthcare in Africa, a controlled spread of disease in Africa and Latin America, as well as improved mental healthcare and decreased stigma in the US.[55] Before that, during Carter's four-year presidential tenure, Rosalynn was an active First Lady by all standards. As Blair and Parry-Giles assert, "More so than any first lady before her, Rosalynn Carter entered the White House keenly aware of the rhetorical opportunities for significant influence afforded a twentieth-century first lady."[56] This awareness, coupled with her candid relationship with her husband, expanded First Lady territory.

Bill Barrow and Michael Warren, writing for the Associated Press, recognize this expansive partnership directly, noting, "The Carters were married for more than 77 years, forging what they both described as a 'full partnership.' Unlike many previous first ladies, Rosalynn sat in on Cabinet meetings, spoke out on controversial issues and represented her husband on foreign trips."[57] Indeed, as First Lady scholars have recognized, "In almost every way, Rosalynn's rhetorical activities—her image as a political advisor, her role as a political surrogate, and her own activist agenda—contributed to the creation of one of the closest working partnerships the White House has ever seen."[58] Considering the large emphasis placed on their "equal partnership" in the ritualized remembrance of Rosalynn, it seems prudent to unpack why this portrayal upholds societal values, and how it might represent our current societal values and/or desires for the future.

In 2020, the Carters broke the record for the longest married presidential couple in history at 74 years, surpassing George H.W. and Barbara Bush. This achievement was touted by the media each year on their anniversary. In general, American views and habits on marriage are changing. Specifically, they are marrying older, and not at all, at increasing rates.[59] Likewise, 40% of the American population feels "pessimistic" about the institution of marriage. Whether nostalgic or resistance to these trends, Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter offer an optimistic, mature archetype of a waning family structure.[60] In discussing his secret to living a long life, Jimmy Carter said, "My biggest secret is to marry the right person if you want to have a long-lasting marriage."[61] In the press coverage of Rosalynn's passing, former President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura

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[55] "Carter Center Accomplishments," March 25, 2024, https://www.cartercenter.org/about/accomplishments.html

[56] Diane M. Blair and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, "Rosalynn Carter: Crafting a Presidential Partnership Rhetorically," in *Leading Ladies of the White House: Communication Strategies of Notable Twentieth-Century First Ladies,* ed. Molly J. Wertheimer, (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2005): 140-163.

[57] Bill Barrow and Michael Warren, "Rosalynn Carter, compassionate and outspoken former first lady, dies at 96, November 19, 2023, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/rosalynn-carter-compassionate-and-outspoken-former-first-lady-dies-at-96

[58] Blair and Parry-Giles, *"Rosalynn,"* 144.

[59] Emily Olson, "'My equal partner in everything': Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter's 77-year marriage, November 20, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/11/20/1214151967/rosalynn-jimmy-carter-marriage-77-years

[60] "Public Has Mixed Views on the Modern American Family," September 14, 2023, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/09/14/public-has-mixed-views-on-the-modern-american-family/

[61] Cory Stieg, "Jimmy Carter: Being married for 75 years is 'an extraordinary thing—here are his secrets for a successful relationship," July 7, 2021, https://www.cnbc.com/2021/07/07/jimmy-carter-and-rosalynn-carter-married-for-75-years-success-tips.html

Bush shared their condolences in a statement that included this praise for the Carters' partnership: "There was no greater advocate of President Carter, and their partnership set a wonderful example of loyalty and fidelity."[62] Recognition of their strong bond in marriage was echoed throughout the coverage. Michael Paterniti writing for the *New York Times* proclaimed, "Disagree as they might, their ferment and conflict proliferate into a full equal partnership."[63] Keith Allen and Kate Anderson Brower for *CNN* sealed the sentiment, noting, "Rosalynn and Jimmy Carter shared what many would call a true American story and a genuine lifelong partnership."[64]

Indeed, in attending to another "American" appeal of this lens, one might look to the neoliberal ideology that permeates American society today. Premised on free markets, capitalism as synonymous with democracy, and above all, individualism as the "American way of life," we can see the parallels to an "equal partnership." As an equal partner, one is free to be an individual, chart their own path, and pursue their own interests as they see fit. The attention to Rosalynn's independent nature and individual interests upholds this understanding. In discussing her approach to campaigning, Daniel Arkin writes, "Rosalynn attracted particular attention for the skillful way she connected with voters, nabbing their support for her husband with down-to-earth warmth. In an unusual move for the era, she traveled across the country on her own, making the case for her husband on her own terms."[65] David Cohen hits on her independence in the White House, noting, "She established the Office of First Lady, worked side by side with her husband as an equal partner in most of the responsibilities of the presidency, and actively pursued her own agenda to make the world a gentler place."[66] Other outlets cited a 2021 interview with *ABC News* that gave credence to this individualism within their equal partnership. When asked how the Carters had stayed happily married, Jimmy Carter credited the "longevity of their union to working on projects and hobbies they [were] both interested in and giving each other space to pursue individual interests."[67] Underlying this read of the "equal partnership" is the notion that equality gives way to individualism and the freedom to pursue one's talents. While the Carters' politics were not aligned with neoliberal ideology, the coverage of Rosalynn's tenure as First Lady lends itself to that prevailing ideology.

Yet another read of the Carters' equal partnership would be as a feminist gesture to political and/or social equality between men and women (i.e., between Rosalynn and Jimmy). As an ideograph, or single term entity that represents the totality of a political or ideological position, "equality" has represented the struggle for social and legal equality for many groups, including African Americans, the LGBTQ community, and women.[68] Additionally, the notion of an "equal partnership" read through the cultural lens of Carter's time in the White House aligns with the second

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[62] Daniel Arkin, "Rosalynn Carter, former first lady and tireless humanitarian who advocated for mental health issues, dies at 96," November 19, 2023, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/obituaries/rosalynn-carter-former-first-lady-dies-rcna62862

[63] Michael Paterniti, "Rosalynn Carter b. 1927," December 22, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/12/22/magazine/rosalyn-carter-death.html.

[64]Keith Allen and Kate Andersen Brower, "Rosalynn Carter, mental health activist, humanitarian and former first lady, dies at 96, November 20, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/11/19/politics/rosalynn-carter-mental-health-activist-humanitarian-and-former-first-lady-dies-at/index.html

[65] Arkin, *"Rosalynn,"* 2023

[66] David Cohen, "Former first lady Rosalynn Carter dies at 96, November 19, 2023, https://www.politico.com/news/2023/11/19/rosalynn-carter-first-lady-obituary-074640

[67] "Bill Hutchinson, "Rosalynn Carter remained her husband's rock of support to the end," November 19, 2023, https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/secrets-shared-jimmy-rosalynn-carter-8-decade-marriage/story?id=97322890

[68] Michael Calvin McGee, "The "ideograph": A link between rhetoric and ideology." *Quarterly journal of speech*, no. 66, (1980): 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638009383499; Megan E. Morrissey, "Equality as an Ideograph:

wave of feminism. Though the second wave is not easily defined, a common descriptor of "the personal is political" references an underlying argument that women's individual problems stem from their political oppression.[69] Though Rosalynn Carter never claimed to be a "feminist" during the 1970s and 1980s, the coverage of her passing points toward actions that support women's progress toward political equality. Barrow and Warren write of her activism blurring the lines between presidential spouse and activist: "Fiercely loyal and compassionate as well as politically astute, Rosalynn Carter prided herself on being an activist first lady, and no one doubted her behind-the-scenes influence. When her role in a highly publicized Cabinet shakeup became known, she was forced to declare publicly, 'I am not running the government.'"[70] Anderson and Brower cite her many achievements aimed toward equality, which was echoed across news outlets:

As first lady she fought for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have amended the Constitution to outlaw civil rights discrimination based on sex.…She was the first first lady to work out of the East Wing. Before her, first ladies worked from an office on the second or third floors of the White House in the family's private residence. And under her watch, full-time positions in the East Wing grew by almost 20%.[71]

Finally, perhaps the most interesting take on this perspective was Michael Paterniti writing for the *New York Times*' special on "artists, innovators and thinkers" we lost in 2023. Paterniti writes of Carter:

> She's the first first lady to create her own office in the East Wing. She sits in on cabinet meetings, another first. She furthers her mental-health agenda, becomes an envoy to Central America. The press nicknames her Mrs. President, calls her Steel Magnolia. . . . Her husband is described as a mix of tenderness and detachment, as the historian Garry Wills says, his demeanor a "cooing which nonetheless suggests the proximity of lions." She is the lion.[72]

Yet, as admirable as Rosalynn Carter's efforts for women's equality were, despite the clear nod to her individualism and streaks of political independence, it would be unwise to overlook the fact that in all the coverage of Rosalynn's remembrance as First Lady, there was never a decoupling of her work from her husband.

The Personal before the Political

The emphasis on Rosalynn's "equal partnership" thus constructs our memory of a First Lady wielding private influence publicly, instead of wielding public influence as agent of change in her own right. In particular, the ritualized remembrance of Rosalynn Carter quells current anxiety about women's standing in the public sphere by paying lip service to "progress" while at the same time firmly tethering her activism to her marriage. This occurs in the slippage between Rosalynn's influence and talent as an individual versus as the partner of Jimmy Carter. It results in an equal partnership that is situated first in marriage, not politics — in coverage that is unable to talk of Rosalynn without Jimmy.

The Gay Rights Movement and Proposition 8," *Paper presented at Alta Conference on Argumentation, Alta, Utah, 2010.*

[69] Bonnie J. Dow, "Review essay: Reading the second wave." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, no. 91 (2005): 89-107. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630500157557

[70] Barrow and Warren, "Rosalynn Carter," 2023

[71] Allen and Brower, *"Rosalynn,"* 2023

[72] Paterniti, *"Rosalynn Carter,"* 2023

This unfolds throughout the attention to Carter's time in the White House in Rosalynn's ritualized remembrance. Katharine Seely writes, "She approached her role as First Lady with the same hands-on spirit—quietly rewriting the rules with her steely determination and steadfast support from her husband, who considered her his closet advisor and 'a very equal partner.'"[73] Writing again for the *AP*, Barrow and Warren note, "Many presidential aides insisted that her political instincts were better than her husband's — they often enlisted her support for a project before they discussed it with the president."[74] M.L. Nestle of *ABC* argues, "The former first lady carved out a profound role at the White House, serving as an envoy abroad and as a political surrogate to her husband."[75] *Politico's* David Cohen goes further to say Rosalynn "was widely credited with expanding the role of first lady beyond the nation's most prominent hostess to an active partner in policy and international travel, becoming a trusted adviser even in an era when most newspapers would only call her 'Mrs. Carter.'"[76] These examples showcase the central role a First Lady could play in an administration. They also illustrate Rosalynn Carter's particular political prowess and determination.

However, with "equal partnership" as the salient transcendent value across the coverage, Rosalynn is always linked to Jimmy Carter, one half of a partnership — never to be untangled, never to be constructed as an agent in her own right—no matter how cutthroat or more political she was than her husband. *CBS News* speaks to this directly, writing, "Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter had a partnership unlike any other known at the time for a president and first lady. Though other first ladies privately advised their husbands, the Carters' bond was deep. Rosalynn Carter was willing to speak her mind to her husband, and he valued her advice. . . . Aides to President Carter sometimes referred to her — privately — as 'co-president.'"[77] Daniel Arkin writes that Rosalynn was a "first lady and humanitarian who championed mental health care," and who "provided constant political counsel to her husband, former President Jimmy Carter."[78] Katharine Seely went as far as to say, "A full 16 years before Bill and Hillary Clinton would offer themselves to the nation as a package deal with the slogan 'Buy one, get one free,' the Carters functioned as near co-presidents."[79] In these instances, despite recognizing her wide-reaching influence, the commonality is Rosalynn's relationship with her spouse. The lack of individualized credit in Rosalynn's mediated eulogizing is not only troubling on an individual level, but also for what Carter's ritualized remembrance suggests about the public memory of the institution of First Lady, writ large.

There are no Co-Presidents

As the US presidency was being drafted, special consideration was given to the president's wife, who was entrusted to maintain appropriate "social style" during the formation of the new republic. Hosting and social politicking quickly became part of the role's unofficial charge. Similarly, because the US president was to be tasked as both the head of state, in ceremonial terms, and as head

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[73] Seelye, *"Rosalynn Carter,"* 2023
[74] Barrow and Warren, *"Rosalynn Carter,"* 2023
[75] M.L. Nestel, Former first lady Rosalynn Carter, wife of the 39th president and advocate for mental health care, dies at 96," November 19, 2023, https://abcnews.go.com/US/former-first-lady-rosalynn-carter-dies/story?id=55565598
[76] Cohen, *"Former,"* 2023
[77] "Rosalynn Carter, former first lady, dies at age 96, November 19, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/rosalynn-carter-dies-age-96-former-first-lady/
[78] Arkin, *"Rosalynn,"* 2023
[79] Seelye, *"Rosalynn Carter,"* 2023

of government, requiring major legislative involvement, he frequently relied on members of his family to represent him when he could not be present. As such, the First Lady often stood in at ceremonial functions, including hosting guests at the White House, and later in campaigning efforts. Thus, by establishing and keeping customs, norms, and rules for diplomacy, parties, and politics, all under the veil of "entertaining," First Ladies have ascertained power.[80] These early precedents would be long lasting.[81]

During the nineteenth century, the lines between private and public work began to blur. First Ladies were called to take their domestic expertise outside the home. Collision with "republican motherhood" demanded a more "active" role in society, though the nature of the work maintained ideological commitment to domestic issues.[82] This social influence became more obvious, and at times more political, over time. For example, in 1844 Sarah Polk garnered supporters of her own and publicly announced she would not be "keeping house" nor making butter as First Lady.[83] Roughly 100 years later, Eleanor Roosevelt used her position as First Lady to benefit women nationwide in political appointments, in gaining employment, and by influencing relevant legislation.[84] Another 50 years later, Hillary Clinton led major healthcare reform for her husband's administration. The level of public visibility and political reach afforded many First Ladies significant social prominence and spotlight within an otherwise male-run political sphere.[85] As Edith Mayo notes, "The first lady's role as social and ceremonial partner to the president has had significant political impact and become an integral part of the presidential administration."[86]

Of course, with increased visibility and influence, whether private or public, criticism of the role also flourished. Mary Todd Lincoln was "extravagant," Edith Wilson ran a "petticoat government," Nancy Reagan "got people fired."[87] Additionally, previous First Ladies have faced the added barrier of the role's antecedent ethos. As Sara Kitsch and Robert Hinck argue, the individual women who hold the role of First Lady represent more than themselves; they also represent contestation over traditional womanhood in the US, and related gender constraints presented by the intuitional memory of the First Ladyship.[88] This is not to say the women who serve as First Lady have not been activists, feminists, or politicians in their own right. Rather, the way we construct, reify, and remember the role makes it difficult to separate the women from the role, even after they vacate the position.

Importantly, then, we must reconcile what this means in terms of the First Lady's public memory. Despite the clear praise of Rosalynn's political aptitude and monumental achievements, there is no "equal partnership" in the presidency; there are no co-presidents. Instead, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has argued, the presidency can be understood as a two-person career. That is, a

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[80] See Anderson, *"The first lady,"* 1-15; Mayo, *"Party Politics,"* 577-590.
[81] Parry-Giles and Blair, *"Rise,"* 565-600.
[82] *Ibid*, 565-600.
[83] Betty Body Caroli, *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama,* New York: Oxford University Press (2010), 164.
[84] *Ibid,* 196.
[85] *Ibid,* xviii-xix.
[86] *Ibid,* xviii-xix.
[87] *Ibid,* xxi
[88] Kitsch and Hinck, *"Hillary,"* 255-256.

career in which traditional husband-wife roles are upended if the career is to be pursued successfully.[89] In this case, the president represents the ideal American male citizen; because the presidency is a site where gender roles are both established and reflected, the role is not complete without a female partner. This is, in part, why the First Ladyship has remained essential, why most presidents have been married, and why all have had a female figure in the White House.[90]

As this analysis has demonstrated, the First Ladyship, and the women who fill the role, become difficult to untangle from the presidency. Yet, if we are to continue upholding the role as a site of female agency, we must prioritize *their* memory. We must untangle the individual women, even if momentarily, from the presidency. We must truly remember them as equals. Optimistically, Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson argue there is room for improvement, as the overarching homogeneity surrounding the role is more attributable to the press framing and media's collective memory than the actual women themselves. Thus, this essay has unpacked one such mechanism by which this process occurs, through the ritualized remembrance of First Ladies.

Remember Rosalynn: Concluding Thoughts and Implications

When the mainstream press eulogizes a nationally known figure, they also contribute to the public memory of individuals and institutions. In particular, the eulogistic form constitutes a media ritual and produces a public memory artifact that is at once fleeting and archivable, which I have called a "ritualized remembrance." As a public memory invention, ritualized remembrance brings to the forefront how and why a society might eulogize a person, institution, or even a place, to address current and/or future needs. In drawing on journalistic techniques such as framing, witnessing, and first-hand accounts, and eulogistic appeals which require little logical structure to persuade, the media's memory-making ritual reifies archetypes and institutions like the First Ladyship through their narratives.

In this essay I have argued that Rosalynn Carter's ritualized remembrance is premised on the transcendent value of her "equal partnership" with her husband Jimmy Carter. The lens of "equal partnership" appeals to a wide variety of present-day needs, depending on how it is read—as an ode to traditional marriage, neoliberal individualism, or even as a hallmark of feminist advancement. However, from both a critical and historical standpoint, it does little to enrich our understanding of the institution of First Lady, a troubling conclusion given recent trends in that role that point toward absence, ambivalence, and/or uncertainty.

Rosalynn Carter was an impressive individual. It is true that much of her life was spent side by side with her husband, Jimmy Carter, and together they accomplished great things. The outcomes of her life's work—her legacy in deeds—are extraordinary. At the same time, we must ask why the press's construction of Rosalynn is unable to separate, even in fragments of their coverage, Rosalynn the individual vs. Rosalynn, one half of an "equal partnership." Almost 20 years ago, Kristy Maddux wrote about the rhetorical significance of the Carters' "equal partnership" in addressing how cultural vocabulary surrounding second wave feminism and foreign policy in the 1970s made salient the idea of liberation; this led to public acceptance (not without critique) of Rosalynn Carter's precedent-breaking trip to Latin America. However, "equal partnership" 50 years later, in 2023, yields a new read, one that may appease current anxieties, but does little to unpack the complexities of modern womanhood.

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[89] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, "The Rhetorical Presidency," in *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency,* ed. Martin J. Medhurst, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996): 179-195.
[90] Kitsch, *"Minting,"* 419-439.

Likewise, such portrayals continue to uphold the presidency as gendered. As Horn Sheeler and Anderson adeptly argue, we must have the tools and resources to "combat the force of hegemonic masculinity as a requirement of presidentiality," to truly envision it as a gender-neutral role.[91] By upholding memories of institutions like the First Ladyship, we recognize at once the individuality of the women who hold the role, but also the cultural constraints that shape their available choices. Otherwise, we ignore the complex challenges women have and continue to face in being political actors in the public sphere. In covering Rosalynn's funeral proceedings, a *New York Times* headline read, "memorial celebrates a public love story."[92] Before his passing, I wondered if Jimmy would be remembered similarly as the other half. He was not.[93]

[91] Kristina Horn Sheeler and Karrin Vasby Anderson, *Woman President: Conforming Postfeminist Political Culture,* College Station: Texas A&M University Press (2013): 15

[92] Peter Baker, "Memorial Celebrates Rosalynn Carter's Life, a "Public Love Story," November 28, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/28/us/politics/rosalynn-carter-memorial-services.html

[93] Peter Baker and Roy Reid, "Jimmy Carter, Peacemaking President amid Crisis, is Dead at 100," December 29, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/29/us/politics/jimmy-carter-dead.html