

TRANSCRIPT OF PRESS CONFERENCE WITH FORMER PRESIDENT JIMMY CARTER AND FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE JAMES BAKER III

SUBJECT: RELEASE OF THE FINAL REPORT OF THE CARTER-BAKER COMMISSION ON FEDERAL ELECTORAL REFORM

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LOCATION: HALL OF COLUMNS, THE CAPITOL, WASHINGTON, D.C.

BODY:

MR. BAKER: Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

Let me begin by simply telling you that election politics is not easy or election reform is not easy, but we have crafted a report here that is a truly bipartisan report. Much of the credit for this report goes to President Carter, who throughout our discussions and negotiations maintained a solid bipartisan approach and spirit.

We have a number of recommendations in this report. Some of these recommendations are to the Congress, others are to the states. We hope that we have a report here, and we believe that we have a report here, that will go a long way toward ending the sterile debate in our politics between ballot integrity on the one hand and ballot access on the other.

We'd be delighted, after President Carter speaks, to entertain your questions about some of the specific recommendations in the report. I hope that all of you by now have received a copy of the report.

Mr. President.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Thank you, Jim.

Well, it's been a pleasure to work with the other 20 members of the commission, about half Democrats and half Republicans, some very experienced in election processes, and the rest of us are learning. It's also been a special pleasure for me to work with Jim Baker, my longtime friend and a person who has, through his leadership on this commission, made it possible for us to give a unanimous report. Every member has endorsed the overall recommendations. There are a few dissenting votes on certain items.

My own experience has been, not only as a campaigner on occasion -- some victories and some losses -- but also the fact that I served with former President Gerald Ford four years ago on a very similar commission following the 2000 election. And as you know, in an almost unprecedented way, the Help America Vote Act was passed in 2002, which went a long way to correct some of the problems that we saw in 2000.

We have made a very deep analysis of the progress of -- "HAVA" it's called, H-A-V-A, Help America Vote Act -- but also to recommend new concepts that would correct additional problems. We've addressed the whole gamut of remaining concerns that American people share to a high

degree over the basic integrity of our election system. We want to have maximum opportunity for everyone in America who's qualified to vote, and to register easily and not to be deprived of that opportunity. We want to make sure that there's a uniformity of application of the rules and regulations and laws that apply to the election process. We want to be sure that people who administer elections in the individual states do so without any allegation that their decisions are biased because of affinities to one party or another. We want to be sure that the voting has integrity; absentee ballots, ballots from overseas, that they have integrity. So we tried to cover, as wide as we could, a broad range of subjects.

We've had some short debates in our deliberations. I think we have reached a consensus here on an overall approach to improving the electoral system that we hope sincerely that the key members of Congress will address with enthusiasm and bring together the wide range of proposals that are already extant in the Congress by individual members' proposals.

Today we were honored to be received by the president. He looked over our report. We hope that he will add his own words of support to what we have done, and that we can go ahead and bring America up to a standard that now exists in many other countries that we don't yet observe.

I just returned Saturday afternoon from a trip to Africa. One of my main purposes in going there was to try to conclude the Ethiopian election results that were initiated last May. We'll be going next year -- next month, rather, to Liberia. That'll be the 62nd election in which the Carter Center has been involved overseas. And some foreign countries have gone far beyond us in making sure that the voting procedures and the registration of voters is a high level of true democracy.

So that's what we hope to see in our country. We've had a lot of progress already, and we hope that the progress in the future will be taken upon themselves by members of Congress, first of all, but also by secretaries of state, governors and legislatures in the individual states because you know that in our system of federalism, the primary responsibility for the administration of elections is within the states, and we didn't try to change that constitutional division. But we hope that states and the federal government in the future will move forward as we have recommended.

Thank you.

Q Mr. President, could you please tell us why the commission concluded that there was a need for a photo ID for all voters?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Yeah. The photo ID proposal was extensively debated by our commission. I personally had, at the beginning, some very serious reservations about this issue, but I was changed by three factors.

One is that some states have passed abominable laws that are a disgrace to democracy and to our country. Georgia, my own home state, is one of those. If you read the Georgia law which was passed this year, you see that it is highly discriminatory and, in my personal opinion, directly designed to deprive older people, African-Americans, poor people of a right to vote. We have 159 counties in Georgia. Only about 55 places in the state will issue these government ID cards, photo ID cards. Atlanta has 450,000 people. There's not a single place in the city of Atlanta under this law where you can go and get a photo ID.

In addition to that, the Georgia Legislature, in their ill- advised attempt to restrict fraud -- which doesn't exist in our state very much -- said you have to pay \$20 for a 5-year permit to vote and \$35 if you want to vote for 10 years. I think all of you would agree that that's an abomination. That's the worst one that I know about. That's one reason that I was inclined to support the recommendations that we've made.

Another reason is that 23 other states also have some form of photo ID required, voter ID, and eight other states are considering it. So the second reason is to make a uniform recommendation in our country, through this report that we've issued, so there is not highly discriminatory laws passed by one party or another.

And the third reason is that we've put in some very careful constraints to prevent abuse. For instance, these photo ID cards will be free. Second, there would be a wide distribution of them. The states would be required to go around the state to issue these photo ID cards to as many people as possible, which would be a good system just for recruiting new voters. This will be very important.

And so this will be, I think, a move forward in getting more people to vote. It will not restrict people from voting. It'll be uniformly applied throughout the country, and it will be non- discriminatory.

Q Mr. Secretary or Mr. President, I'm wondering if you can give me some sense of how broken you think the system is as it exists today?

MR. BAKER: It's still the best system in the world, I think, but that just may be my personal view. Let me add to what President Carter just said about the photo ID, though.

The one other reason I think that the commission came out 86 percent in favor of this photo ID requirement is that anyone who receives this photo ID will automatically be registered to vote. And we don't foresee the possibility that voting clerks, voting registrars, will be able to turn someone down who has a photo ID and presents it. And as President Carter said, not only are they free, but our report calls for the states to make aggressive efforts to go out and seek these people out and provide the photo ID for them.

PRESIDENT CARTER: You might mention the provisional ballots --

MR. BAKER: And the president mentions provisional ballots. If someone does not have their voter ID -- this provision, by the way, kicks in on January 1, 2010, assuming that it's passed. And if you don't have your voter ID, you can vote with a provisional ballot, and your ballot will be counted if there's a signature match, and -- up until 2010. And after that, you have 48 hours -- if you show up at the poll without your photo ID, you have 48 hours to get back to the poll and present your voter ID and have your vote counted.

Your question about the system as a whole -- I was talking at lunch with some others, and one reason that I think that America is the envy of the world in many respects is because of the political stability that we enjoy in this country, which has lasted now for over 200-and-plus years, whatever it is. People invest in our currency; they seek to put their money in the dollar whenever there's a crisis because of the strength of our political system. Sure we have problems. We've addressed what we think are a number of these problems. Every one of the recommendations in our report, whether they are recommendations to the Congress or recommendations to the states, are designed to

improve confidence in our system of federal elections, and there's plenty of room for improvement. Having said that, I think we've got the best system in the world.

Q Mr. President, what's your provision for enforcing your wide-scale distribution method of these photo IDs? How can Congress ensure the states adopt those sort of less restrictive methods?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, we call on HAVA, the bill that was passed in 2002, to be fully implemented. If the Congress would just appropriate the money for HAVA that has already been authorized, then this would cover the extra cost of the photo ID card.

We also, in addition to that, recommend that the states be responsible from the top down for having the voter list be acceptable and accurate. This was part of HAVA, but the provisions were not clear. So 12 of the 50 states still let the counties be responsible for the accuracy and compilation of the voters list. That's another recommendation that we have.

In HAVA also there is a -- not an oversight, because we did all we could -- but each state has to prepare an accurate voters list. But in America every year, 9 million people move from one state to another, and there's no requirement in the present law that the state lists be interoperable; that Georgia and Alabama could compare who's voting twice.

So those are the kind of things that we believe should be done. But to answer your question specifically, we hope that part of this legislation, as it applies to uniformity all over the nation, will be passed by the Congress. And the rest of it, I would say most of the recommendations will apply to the individual states -- to their governor, legislatures and secretaries of state.

Q Mr. President?

Q Mr. President, with Katrina and the cost of Katrina, and the cost of Iraq, and the budget issues that are going on, what concerns do you have that some of these very good suggestions that involve spending money may have a tough time getting the kind of attention that maybe they deserve?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, Jim knows a lot more about federal budgeting now than I do, but I would say that the most costly aspect is what we refer to for everybody to have a free ID card. If that is paid for by the federal government, then the full financing of HAVA as already authorized would be adequate. The additional cost would be to make the state lists interoperable, which I also mentioned, and this would cost about \$280 million for the entire country. But -- there are some other costs as well, but those two main items would cost \$1.3 billion; as I say, a billion dollars of that is already authorized.

So there'll be some costs, but I think that in comparison with other things, the complete integrity of the American election system, confidence of our people in it, which doesn't exist now, would be very good, and the uniformity of application would also be good.

Yes?

Q Mr. President, there have been several hearings, both in the House and the Senate already, where state officials who are responsible for the elections have said they're waiting on the money to implement these other provisions of HAVA. Are you confident that your report today will maybe

provide a little political push-start to get that money going to the states so they can get this next iteration going?

PRESIDENT CARTER: To answer your question, I'm confident that our report will make a little push to the consummation of HAVA, yes. How much push, I don't know. But I think this depends to a substantial degree on the news media, how much emphasis you place on it. I think there's been some very good articles written this morning in the Washington newspaper, New York newspapers, and others around the country; pretty positive, I would say, about our report. But I think we need to keep this alive because it's going to be a burning issue. And we'll be facing a 2006 election, a 2008 election, and we hope that most of our recommendations will be passed by then.

I might point out that the other members of our commission -- only two are absent today -- are behind us, and we are very proud of them. And they've really worked hard on this report, as did Dr. Pastor and other people of **American University**. It's been a very good experience for us.

Maybe one more question. Yeah.

MR. BAKER: Let me just add, the first recommendation of the report, if you look at it, is that HAVA be fully funded, and we hope that that will bear some fruit.

PRESIDENT CARTER: One other point that I don't think we've mentioned is that, as you know, under HAVA, there was a strong impetus to have electronic voting, to do away with the hanging chads and so forth. And that's good, but there's been a wide range of concern that this completely secret and impenetrable system of computer software might open up another avenue of fraud. So one of the things we are recommending is that there be a backup on paper, which other countries are already doing, by the way -- it's a simple technological matter; Nevada did it this past year -- so that there can be some comparison on the part of the voter: This is the way I touched the screen; did my ballot comply? And they look at the paper ballot.

Another thing is that even if the voter is not concerned individually, collectively there needs to be some way to judge either allegations of discrepancies or fraud, and, on very close elections, to confirm the accuracy of the overall report.

And a third thing is to make sure that everyone knows in advance that there will be an auditing procedure undertaken, so that anybody who's tempted at the beginning to do something fraudulent will know that 1 (percent) or 2 percent of all the voting places in the state will be arbitrarily selected, and the paper ballot and the electronic ballot compared. This would go a long way to deter any kind of temptation to fraud.

Maybe one other question.

MR. BAKER: All of these recommendations -- all of these recommendations will increase confidence in our electoral system.

PRESIDENT CARTER: One last question. One more question.

Q Could you explain how you would get your regional primary system to work, how you get the states to along? And who gets to break the news to Iowa and New Hampshire?

PRESIDENT CARTER: Well, we did not interfere with Iowa and New Hampshire. Some members of our commission felt very strongly that Iowa and New Hampshire are not representative states and they have a major, you know, impact on the outcome of the election. But we bypassed that hornet's nest and decided not to get involved in that, and we didn't recommend that Iowa and New Hampshire be removed. But the other 48 states, we do recommend that the voting procedures be by regions, and just say the Eastern Seaboard region would be maybe first in the first presidential election, and then the regions would rotate every four years, so over a period of -- four times four -- of 16 years, every state would have its first chance.

This will be very important because if you look at the results of the primary elections for a long period of time, our staff determined that by the time the primaries are basically over, only 8 percent of the American people have actually voted in the primary system. And this would give all of the voters in our country a much greater opportunity to participate in choosing the nominees for the Democratic and Republican parties and shaping the outcome even for independent candidates.

MR. BAKER: This is a proposal that has been on the table for quite some time by the secretaries of state of the various states. It would take the cooperation of states, probably political parties, but Congress would probably also have the power to legislate this if it chose to do so.

PRESIDENT CARTER: Thank you all very much.

MR. BAKER: Thank you very much. Thank you.

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