



Jimmy Carter Library & Museum News Release

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White House Solar Panel Goes on Display at Carter Library

1979 Effort to Encourage Alternative Energy Sources Became "Road Not Taken"

Atlanta, GA. – In June, 1979, President Jimmy Carter proposed a “new solar strategy” to “move our Nation toward true energy security and abundant, readily available energy supplies.” In an effort to set an example for the country, Carter had solar panels installed on the roof of the White House West Wing. The panels were used to heat water for the staff mess and other areas of the White House.

At the time, President Carter warned “a generation from now, this solar heater can either be a curiosity, a museum piece, an example of a road not taken, or it can be a small part of one of the greatest and most exciting adventures ever undertaken by the American people; harnessing the power of the Sun to enrich our lives as we move away from our crippling dependence on foreign oil.”

On Friday, March 30th, the White House solar panel will in fact become “a museum piece” at the Carter Presidential Library and Museum. The solar panel will be a new addition to the museum’s section on President Carter’s energy policies.

“I think people will be surprised to learn how modern Carter’s statements on energy were when the panels were put on the White House roof,” Carter Library Director Jay Hakes said. “It was clearly ahead of its time.”

The White House solar panels were a symbol of the Carter Administration’s commitment to reduce America’s dependence of foreign sources of energy, according to Hakes, who was the Administrator of the Energy Information Administration at the U.S. Department of Energy during the Clinton presidency. “Behind that was a whole package of tax incentives, research and development and loans that made it much more than a symbol,” Hakes added. “There was actually a very substantive attempt to move ahead the expanded use of solar energy.”

President Ronald Reagan took the solar panels down in 1986 when the White House roof was being repaired.

President Carter’s goal of getting 20% of the nation’s energy needs from the Sun by the end of the Twentieth Century remains unrealized. Today, only 6 % of the country’s energy requirements come from renewable sources. That’s the same as it was when Carter entered the White House.

“I think if you are looking for the one pivotal moment in the history of renewable energy in the United States, this would probably be it,” Hakes said. “This new display may help people imagine that if the road had been taken to use more renewables that the current problems of dependency on unreliable sources of oil and climate change would probably be much less than they are today.”

Editors Note: For more information or images of the solar panels on the White House roof, contact the Carter Library - Public Affairs Office at 404-865-7109 or tony.clark@nara.gov.