



A Road Not Taken: Solar Panels, Jimmy Carter, and Missed Opportunities for Change

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"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 just 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."

Jimmy Carter, 1979

Yesterday, I attended the annual assembly of the [Swiss Energy Foundation](#), an organization founded in 1976 for advancing the use of sources of renewable energy in Switzerland, to make Switzerland less dependent on fossil fuel imports, and to protect Switzerland from the potential dangers posed by nuclear reactors.

In connection with the annual assembly, a movie was shown, released by two Swiss artists, [Christina Hemauer](#) and [Roman Keller](#) in 2010, entitled [A Road Not Taken](#).

Which road is it that we haven't taken? Let me start from the beginning.

In 2007, the two young artists had an [art exhibit](#) here in Switzerland displaying photographs and a short history of the solar collectors that were installed on the roof of the White House in 1979 by explicit request of President Jimmy Carter to symbolize the need of the United States to free itself from the dependence on fossil fuel imports. These solar collectors were removed again in 1986 by explicit request of President Ronald Reagan to symbolize his conviction that cheap energy would be available to the U.S. for a very long time to come.

Hemauer and Keller sent a letter to Jimmy Carter, inviting him to the "vernissage," the opening of their art exhibit. Evidently, they didn't really expect to ever hear back from him. After all, he was a very famous man, and they were just two struggling young artists.

To their great surprise, Jimmy Carter *did* reply. He sent them a courteous letter back, apologizing for not being able to attend the event while simultaneously inviting them to Atlanta for an interview with him.

This was when Hemauer and Keller decided to take the project one step further and create a movie documenting the history of the solar collectors that were installed on and then removed from the roof of the White House--a piece of American history, not known to most people outside the United States, and probably not remembered by most Americans either.

Jimmy Carter was a very gracious host, as he not only gave the two Swiss greenhorns an interview, but also opened his archives to them. As a consequence, a movie was produced that is a kaleidoscope of new footage describing the quest across the Eastern part of the United States on the path taken by these solar panels, mixed with historical footage from the time when these panels were first installed on the roof of the White House. The movie also contains interviews, not only with Jimmy Carter, but with a good number of other people involved in the events of those days. I had a great time. It turned out to be a fascinating evening.

Having already been energy-conscious in those years, I personally remembered the installation of the solar collectors and also their removal. However, I knew nothing about the surrounding events, and I did not remember that Jimmy Carter did considerably more to free the U.S. from energy imports than only install a bunch of solar collectors on the roof of the White House to heat the water for the staff eating area. Hearing and seeing a replay of some of his speeches of those days from the Oval Office was thus a revelation to me. I didn't know that Carter had managed to reduce the oil imports to the U.S. by one third during his presidency. He did so by reducing the speed limit on U.S. freeways, by new regulations concerning required efficiency standards for electric appliances, and by a number of other measures.

Carter had gotten it wrong. He fully believed that the oil crises of 1973 and 1979 were indeed early indicators of the beginning of a world-wide fossil fuel shortage. He knew about Hubbert and Forrester and Meadows, and he truly believed that Peak Oil had come and gone right there and then, as indeed it had, at least as far as U.S. oil production was concerned.

He was a visionary and a zealot, and he expressed his convictions in no uncertain terms on each and every occasion, and the American public hated him for it with a passion. After all, these were the United States of America, the land of *unlimited possibilities*, so they had been told since their first breaths. How dared this new President tell them otherwise. How dared he express the view that the resources of this planet were finite, that there were *limits to growth*?

Shapiro, one of Carter's speechwriters expressed it well in the movie. Americans are deeply religious. They know that Moses didn't bring Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai but eleven. The eleventh commandment, recited rarely, is that Americans shall always have cheap energy. It is their birthright. They live in the land of the free. They are free to fill'er up, any time and as often as they wish, and at an affordable price.

Jimmy Carter told them about false freedom. He told them that true freedom is the freedom of the others. True freedom is not to indulge in selfishness and grab everything for oneself because one can. This type of freedom would invariably lead to conflict and ultimately collapse. However, there exists another type of freedom, the freedom to work together for the benefit of all. Each of us should sacrifice a little so that, in the end, we could all lead better lives. This would free us of fossil fuel dependence. It would lead to a happier and cleaner world. It would lead to stability, to sustainability.

He told them that they had a choice. They could make the choice between false and true freedom, and the American people listened, because choose they did. They elected Ronald Reagan who promised them continued exponential growth forever.

However, let me return to the movie. What happened to those solar panels?

Ronald Reagan had them removed from the roof of the White House in 1986. Subsequently, they were stored in a government warehouse in Washington DC. In 1991, they were acquired by [Unity College](#) of Maine, an environmentally-minded college, where the symbolic value of these panels was appreciated. They installed 12 of the panels on the roof of their cafeteria, where they were used until 2005. Then the boiler broke, and they didn't have the financial means to get it repaired. Thus, the panels are still on the roof, but they are no longer in operation. The other panels were stored in a shed on campus.

Our two protagonists found out about the current location of these panels and drove an old beaten-up Dodge Ram pickup truck, retrofitted to run on vegetable oil -- noblesse oblige, all the way up to Maine, where they convinced the current president of Unity College to part with two of the panels in the shed. They promised to take one of them to Washington DC to donate it to the [National Museum of American History](#) and the other to Atlanta to donate it to the [Museum of the Jimmy Carter Library](#).

On their way south, they passed through Three Mile Island, and here, we were told about another piece of American history, also playing itself out in 1979. We saw a young and energetic Jane Fonda speak to the crowds after the Three Mile Island nuclear accident. She told them that enough was enough. The U.S. needed a national energy strategy that was based on putting the long-term interest and safety of the American public first and not the interests of greedy CEOs of energy companies whose only goal it is to maximize their short-term profits. This sounds eerily familiar. Where did I hear similar speeches recently?

Then they arrived in Washington DC, where their gift was rejected by the museum, because our two adventurers weren't in the possession of the right documents. They would have needed an official donation certificate by Unity College, which they subsequently procured, so that the panel finally ended up at the museum after all. Whether it will ever be put on public display is an entirely different story.

Then they continued down to Atlanta, where they were welcomed with open arms and appreciation. No forms were required to donate one of these panels to the Carter Library.

Will this movie ever make it to the big screens in the U.S.? I have my doubts, although it should. After all, it revives a little known piece of American history. Yet, history is not a collection of events that occurred in the past. It is what we remember of those events.

Let me end this short story with a personal account. My wife and I moved from Switzerland to Tucson in 1984. We quickly had a solar collector installed on the roof of our new house. After all, sun shines in abundance in Southern Arizona.

We were told by the company, [Sunpower of Arizona](#), that we should hurry, because Reagan would let the energy credit expire by the end of 1984. If we installed the system in 1984, we would be able to get an energy credit of 66%. The system was priced at \$6000, but we only would have to pay \$2000 out of pocket. The other \$4000 we would get back with our next tax declaration. And so we hurried. After all, \$4000 is a lot of money.

On January 2, 1985, the price of the system miraculously dropped from \$6000 to \$2000, because this is how much the company figured, Americans would be willing to pay for a solar hot water heater.

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This is America. This is true entrepreneurship. Whatever Americans touch turns to gold, or so we are told. In America, King Midas is still alive and well.

[Link to Trailer](#)



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