

DEMOCRATIC **99** CONVENTION

Former President Carter draws a crowd yesterday as he arrives for a meeting with Gov. Bill Clinton. AFP PHOTO

A political resurrection

Once bitterly scorned, Carter returns as party statesman

By Adam Pertman
GLOBE STAFF

NEW YORK - When Jimmy Carter left the White House more than a decade ago, many Democrats were angry, frustrated and critical of him and his performance in office. Perhaps more than anything, they were embarrassed.

Last night, the most popular former president in the United States stepped up to the podium in Madison Square Garden, where he was nominated in 1976 and renominated in 1980. He received an enthusiastic, sustained standing ovation.

"There is life after the White House," Carter told the crowd in Madison Square Garden, beaming the smile that once lingered in some memories as his most enduring characteristic. But it turned out not to be.

Instead, polls and interviews indicate that many Americans in both parties, and a majority of Democrats, now recall the Georgian's stewardship of this country fondly. And that they now

view a man they once considered inept and sanctimonious to be thoughtful and decent.

"I can't tell you how glad I am he's speaking tonight," said Nancy Richards-Stower, a delegate from Merrimack, N.H., who described herself as a liberal who did not particularly care for Carter during his four years in the Oval Office.

"It gives us a chance to thank him for the honor he brought to the presidency and to the post-presidency," Richards-Stower added in an interview. "Ronald Reagan went to Japan and made \$2 million for himself; Jimmy Carter worked in this country and raised \$2 million for homeless people."

Several polls during the last couple of years have found Carter rising in the public's view, including a Gallup survey in which Carter's favorability rating was 74 percent to Gerald R. Ford's 68 percent, Ronald Reagan's 58 percent and Richard M. Nixon's 54 percent.

By all accounts, it is largely upon

his good works since he left public life that Carter has rebuilt his reputation. He has remained a statesman, helping mediate international disputes through the Carter Center he founded in Atlanta, and participating in hands-on projects such as building homes for the poor.

Democrats, in particular, assert that two other factors also have contributed to his rehabilitation: a better understanding of the economic and political conditions that led to his once-abysmal poll standings, and a swing of the national mood away from the excesses of the last decade.

"I think that, leaving the 1980s going into the 1990s, there is a resurgence of idealism, especially among young people," Sen. David Boren of Oklahoma, who has worked with the former president on international issues at the Carter Center, said in an interview here last night. "Jimmy Carter is a model for them, and he should be."