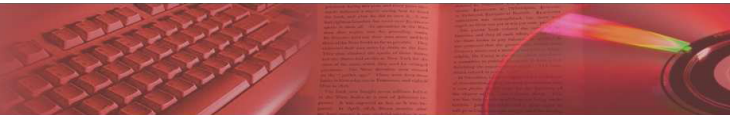


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stuart Eizenstat. *President Carter: The White House Years.* New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2018. 1,024 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-250-10455-7.

Reviewed by Susan M. Hartmann (The Ohio State University)

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Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Scholars and general readers interested in the complex processes of policymaking will welcome *President Carter*, an extensive and detailed account of his four years in office and a meticulous assessment of Carter's accomplishments and failures. A native Atlantan with a Harvard law degree and experience in Lyndon Johnson's White House, Stuart Eizenstat served as a policy advisor in Carter's gubernatorial and presidential campaigns and then became his chief domestic policy adviser (and informal assistant on Middle East policy) after he won the 1976 election.

The book is a memoir but one with a depth of analysis that matches scholarly treatments of a presidency. Unlike those undergirding most presidential histories, Eizenstat's sources are almost exclusively his copious notes from every meeting or conversation at which he was present; some records from the Carter Presidential Library; and more than three hundred interviews with individuals who crossed Carter's path, including others in the executive branch, senators and representatives, foreign officials, business executives, journalists, and more. An extensive bibliography appears on a website that contains supplementary material for the book, but only a handful of these secondary sources are cited in footnotes.

Although Eizenstat does not engage directly with other histories of the Carter administration, he insists that critics have both underestimated Carter's significant strengths as chief executive and failed to recognize his substantial achievements. He agrees with most of the familiar criticisms—Carter's reliance on Georgians with little Washington experience, his refusal to prioritize among a set of ambitious goals, his failure to appoint

a chief of staff, his self-righteousness. Above all, Eizenstat emphasizes the president's misguided belief that he could separate policy from politics, an assumption that frequently mired his legislative goals, even though he enjoyed substantial Democratic majorities in Congress throughout his presidency. While holding Carter and his administration—including himself—responsible for blunders that could have been avoided, Eizenstat also describes the near intractable issues they had to deal with, including stagflation, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Iran's seizure of US hostages.

Eizenstat pays most attention to the areas where he believes Carter was most successful. He provides a detailed account (more than one hundred pages) of new energy and environmental policies, the difficult challenges to achieving them, and their long-term significance. He devotes even more space to the negotiations leading up to the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, examining Carter's leading role in overcoming seemingly irreconcilable forces. He credits Carter with taking the first steps in a number of areas where Reagan is usually given the credit (or blame). Carter appointed Paul Volcker chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, whose policies extinguished the extreme inflation of the 1970s. With attention to the airline, trucking, and telecommunication industries, he began the process of deregulation, which Eizenstat presents as a consumer-friendly but labor-weakening reform. And he credits Carter for contributing to the ultimate demise of the Soviet Union through his human rights campaign (unevenly applied as it was) and his strong response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Eizenstat leaves very little out, even defending Carter from the charges that he micromanaged use of the White House tennis court and tried to kill a swamp rabbit. Nonetheless, with his aim to set the record straight on Carter's achievements and his assumption that moving to the center was what the Democratic Party needed, Eizenstat pays relatively little attention to failures on policies of concern to liberals such as full-employment legislation. And, given his detailed attention to energy policy, it is surprising that he does not discuss nuclear energy or the partial meltdown of a nuclear reactor at the Three-Mile Island in March 1979, which Carter visited shortly

after the accident.

Through some 900 pages Eizenstat keeps the reader engaged with clear and well-paced prose, details that only an insider could know, and references to current developments such as economic sanctions against Iran. The book is organized thematically rather than strictly chronologically, better enabling the reader to grasp a particular area of policy as it developed throughout Carter's presidency. While most historians have already acknowledged most of Carter's significant achievements, Eizenstat provides critical detail and an overall argument that is as judicious as his analyses of specific decisions.

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