

President Carter: The White House Years

Stuart E. Eizenstat (Thomas Dunne Books, 2018), 898 pp., notes, index.

Reviewed by Thomas G. Coffey

Editor's note: In 2018, soon after the publication of President Carter: The White House Years, reviewer Thomas Coffey interviewed author Stuart E. Eizenstat, who served as the chief White House Domestic Policy Advisor during the Carter administration. Eizenstat also served on the White House staff of President Johnson, as US ambassador to the European Union, as under secretary of state, and as deputy secretary of the US Treasury under President Clinton. For President Obama, he served as special adviser to Secretaries of State Clinton and Kerry on issues concerning the Holocaust. During the Carter years, Eizenstat participated in policymaking on several foreign policy issues, including the Israel–Egypt peace talks, and sanctions policy against Iran and the Soviet Union. Some of his reminiscences and insights from that era are interspersed within the book review below.

A common defense of poorly regarded past presidencies is that bad politics negated good policies. At its most palatable, this defense blames weak presidential leadership; at its least, the citizenry takes it on the chin for being shortsighted and uninformed. Stuart Eizenstat, former chief domestic policy advisor to Jimmy Carter, keeps much of his aim squarely on the president. Part memoir, history, and testimonial, *President Carter: The White House Years* is a balanced and credible, if not altogether convincing, revisionist look at this much maligned presidency. Readers may not buy Eizenstat's argument that Carter had "one of the most consequential one-term presidencies in modern history," but they will come away with a better understanding of the man and his policies. (1)

Research for the book started in 1981. Eizenstat interviewed 325 individuals from the administration, including President Carter and Vice President Walter Mondale as well as outside observers, Republicans and Democrats alike. He also took 5,000 pages of notes covering every phone conversation and meeting he attended to stay on top of the issues, many of them involving foreign affairs (4). At roughly 1,000 pages in length, the book reads like one long, though quite compelling, reference aid for the many controversies surrounding the Carter administra-

tion. This exhaustive quality (e.g., the index even flags the "killer rabbit episode," recounted below), however, gives the book a defensive tone.

A major aspect of any revisionist history is debunking some of the negative stories that comprise the conventional wisdom about its subject. Some of the false claims about Carter were legendary:

- The "malaise" speech given in July 1979 never used that word and, contrary to the morale-sinking reputation it gained, actually boosted Carter's approval rating by 17 points. (691)
- Carter did not micromanage the White House tennis court schedule. Kindly permitting all his staffers to use it, he only asked that they contact his secretary before playing. Otherwise, he was put in the awkward position of having to kick staffers off the court when he walked out there with the intent of playing. (711)
- Carter never was attacked by a "killer rabbit" during a fishing trip. The president told a down-home story about splashing pond water to scoot away a swimming bunny, which press secretary Jody Powell exaggerated to a small circle of his acquaintances for fun. Each press retelling of the story was embellished to make Carter look jumpy and weak. (712)
- Carter did not get carried away and intend to kiss Soviet Premier Brezhnev on both cheeks during the SALT II signing ceremony. Staffers warned him about the optics of this custom of Russian men, but there was little the president could do to avoid Brezhnev's big bear embrace upon signing the arms control treaty. (632)
- Carter did not skimp on the number of helicopters used in the disastrous Iran hostage rescue mission. The plan called for six; the military added one extra as a contingency, and Carter told them to add another helicopter—for a total of eight. (797)

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Part of the reason these stories have stuck in people's minds is that few people were willing to give the benefit of a doubt to the irksome Carter. Eizenstat notes the president could come across as a "public scold, who disdained politics." (2) He'd rather bone up on the minute details of a policy than sell it to Congress. Carter, who regarded the Democratic Party as an "albatross," expressed relief when the SALT II treaty was pulled from congressional consideration, noting, "Now I don't have to kiss every senator's ass." (652) Mondale described his boss as a "domestic recluse" who needed to get out and understand people's real concerns. (676) Carter confided to an aide that he was "antisocial" and preferred fishing and hunting. (679) He also admitted to Eizenstat that he could be "awfully stubborn. A cause of my success. May also be a cause of my political failures." (498)

The stubborn drive to secure a peace accord was very much in evidence during the triumphant Camp David summit in September 1978. That and the personal touch so lacking with Carter on domestic politics surfaced repeatedly in these negotiations. To get Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel to give up land conquered in the Sinai Desert in exchange for diplomatic recognition and peace with Egypt, Carter pulled out all stops—from sending heartfelt messages to Begin's relatives to taking both Begin and Sadat to the battlefield at Gettysburg, where the message about "the costs of war and the rewards of peace to two countries that had repeatedly fought each other" for years was sure to resonate. (510)

Carter became heavily involved in drafting the accord and presenting the changes to the two Middle Eastern leaders for approval, a job normally tasked to a lower-level functionary. "The two leaders never actually negotiated face-to-face. Their relationship was so poisonous Carter quickly realized he had to keep them separated and work through their delegations." Eizenstat notes that Carter read CIA profiles on both leaders to prepare for the Summit.^a (432–43) Carter got along quite well with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, but there was only so much of Begin's pedantry the president could take. Eizenstat concluded that Begin and Carter "brought out the worst in each other." (528)

a. See Jerrold Post, "Personality Profiles in Support of the Camp David Summit" *Studies in Intelligence* 23, no. 2 (Summer, 1979): 1–5, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1979-06-01b.pdf>.

The accord was the high point of Carter's foreign policy, which also included the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty in September 1977, the normalization of diplomatic relations with China in December 1978, and the Bonn economic summit in 1978 that secured commitments to boost worldwide growth while conserving energy. The following year, 1979, was to prove Carter's undoing, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the taking of the American hostages in Iran.

After the invasion, the Carter Doctrine drew a line in the sand stressing that "any attempt by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States." (10) The doctrine reflected Carter's "assuming the worst" even though his CIA director cautioned the invasion was probably not the start of a bigger Soviet land-grab.^b The development of a Rapid Deployment Force, strengthening of alliances in the region, and support to the Afghan resistance were part of an overall boost in defensive measures to counter the Soviet Union.

Robert Gates, who served in Carter's National Security Council, has always maintained the president was much more of a Cold War hawk than depicted, and that "Reagan reaped the harvest sown by Nixon, Ford, and Carter." (615) Still, the notion Carter was naïve about Soviet intentions, which was exacerbated by his admission that "his opinion has changed more drastically in the last week [i.e., since the invasion of Afghanistan] than even the previous two and a half years," would plague him. (639)

The CIA played a small but very consequential role in Carter's presidency, first as a major impetus behind his sweeping reforms to address the energy crisis that Carter characterized as the "moral equivalent of war."^c (166) A dire assessment based on the subsequent CIA report, *The International Energy Situation: Outlook to 1985*,^d was

b. See, for example, Robert Gates, *From the Shadows* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), 147.

c. Eizenstat shared in the interview that, though the alarmist CIA energy assessment stirred Carter to move early in the administration on reform, "Energy was not a major campaign issue for Carter . . . [and was] not particularly urgent, but Carter saw a need to deal with our country's growing dependence on OPEC oil imports." Eizenstat asserted that "not having a chief of staff to set priorities was behind this early emphasis on energy policy, which collided with other priorities."

d. *The International Energy Situation: Outlook to 1985* (CIA report #ER77-10240 U, April 1977, <https://www.cia.gov/library/reading->

briefed to him as president-elect. The report predicted that world demand for oil would substantially exceed capacity by 1985 and this would lead to sharp price increases “no matter what Saudi Arabia does.” (147) The analysis was wrong, as higher oil prices led to greater production and less consumption—by the mid-1980s, the market was experiencing a glut. It’s hard to know whether, forewarned by overly alarmist intelligence, Carter and his reform program actually contributed to the subsequent fall in oil prices. The CIA report galvanized the president, and helped convince Carter to move energy issues to the top of his agenda. The battles Carter fought for energy reform lasted two years, at great political cost. Carter told Eizenstat the focus on energy “sapped our strength.” (239)

The fall of the shah of Iran and the taking of American hostages in Tehran probably doomed Carter’s presidency. Eizenstat is strident about CIA’s failure on three aspects of this two-year long crisis. “One could fill an ocean with what the United States did not know about developments in Iran.” (726) The first failure was not recognizing the strength of the opposition and its leadership. The second was the failure to judge that the shah would refuse to clamp down, in part because he was terribly weakened by cancer. And, finally, the Intelligence Community failed to warn of Ayatollah Khomeini’s intent to create a fundamentalist religious state—not to simply serve as some outside spiritual influence. Eizenstat saw this information as being “there for the taking” in France, where Khomeini was exiled. A visiting academic and future US ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, visited the ayatollah and immediately discerned Khomeini’s true intentions. (734)

In the fall of the 1978, Brzezinski complained to the president about the poor intelligence from CIA and recommended Carter send a note to Director Turner.^a Carter said he was “dissatisfied with the quality of political intelligence” on Iran. (725) Eizenstat shed additional light on this fraught relationship, observing that former DCI Stansfield Turner (whom Eizenstat interviewed twice), felt cut out of major foreign policy deliberations by National Security Advisor Brzezinski, specifically by being

excluded from regular Friday breakfasts with top foreign policy officials and being initially shut out of planning for the hostage rescue operation—until he demanded a role. Eizenstat described his own participation in one of the first National Security Council meetings to explore options after the hostages were taken: “I suggested we could effectively shut down the Iranian economy by blockading Kharg Island, from which Iran exported the bulk of its oil.” Carter, Eizenstat said, feared this step might lead to the killing of the hostages, and that failure to consider a blockade or a mining of Iranian harbors meant “Carter was negotiating with an almost empty hand.”

Turner described the president’s note as a “hard blow,” but wondered if the CIA was being made a scapegoat, for there was plenty of blame to go around.^b Intelligence analysts did misjudge the strength of the opposition, the appeal of Islamic fundamentalism, and the shah’s grip on power. However, the analysts were working from a restricted information base, given a US policy understanding to limit embassy and station reporting on internal politics in return for the shah’s permitting collection on the border against the Soviet Union. (726) Many policy officials did not know this. The analysts’ failure to make plain the lack of reporting on internal politics gave their judgments a false sense of certainty. As Eizenstat notes, the shah’s cancer was a closely guarded secret, known to very few in his inner circle. This secrecy contributed to the backlash and taking of hostages when the shah visited the United States for treatment. Having no inkling of the shah’s cancer when he was head of state, many Iranians assumed Washington was lying about the purpose of the visit and was instead making plans with the shah to put him back in power (764). Better intelligence analysis may not have met a receptive audience. The US ambassador’s more accurate warnings about the shah’s doomed rule was disputed by Brzezinski and got him sidelined. (735)

To be of any actionable policy use, Turner thought that three-to-four years’ prior warning was needed to get the shah to change course. Interestingly, intelligence analysts did warn in the early-to-mid-1960s of political upheaval that would be “revolutionary in nature . . . that it remains uncertain whether Iran will make the ultimate transition to modern life without experiencing a violent revolution.”

room/docs/CIA-RDP80R01362A000200070002-9.pdf).

a. Eizenstat shared that Carter’s approach to the CIA could be “traced back to campaign speeches that focused on not repeating the policies that had come under criticism under the Church committee while pressing for greater oversight [and that] Carter put in place the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act court system, setting the rules of surveillance inside the United States.”

b. See Stansfield Turner, *Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition* (Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 113.

Yet this line of analysis was dropped.^a The shah's longevity in office probably suggested he would continue to weather the political storm created by his modernization program.^b

Worth contemplating is a President Carter who might have been amply warned about a superficially stable Iran. Eizenstat stresses the president liked to aggressive-

a. Eizenstat believed that accurate intelligence on Iran would have made a difference with Carter. In the interview, he recalled, "Turner admitted he and the CIA had not served Carter well on Iran." Carter and Brzezinski disagreed with Ambassador Sullivan's recommendation to abandon the Shah of Iran and reach out to Khomeini given his more negative view of the Shah's prospects. "Now, if Stan [then-DCI Stansfield Turner] had given the same message," Eizenstat said, "the president might have listened, but would still have sought ways to bolster the shah."

b. Central Intelligence Agency, *National Intelligence Estimate 34-64: Prospects for Iran*, 28 February 1961, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000011590.pdf.

ly tackle challenges other presidents had "sidestepped and ignored." (3) Perhaps these types of issues—energy, Middle East peace, airline deregulation, the Panama Canal—gave Carter the initiative and the luxury of time to be at his stubborn best. However, as with other presidents, Carter was less sure-footed when reacting to breaking developments—the fall of the shah, hostage crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. This flaw was especially apparent in Carter's reaction to the early and breaking news of a landslide victory for Ronald Reagan during Election Day 1980. Wanting to "get it over with," Carter made his concession speech 90 minutes before the polls closed in the western part of the country. This risked discouraging turnout for Democrats on the ticket and led Speaker Tip O'Neill to fume, "You guys came in like a bunch of jerks, and I see you're going out the same way." Representative Tom Foley complained this was "vintage Carter at his dead worst." (891)



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