

As appeared in
The Montauk Sun
December 2019 Edition

**"President Carter: The
White House Years"**
By Stuart Eizenstat
Review by MH Fryburg

Stuart Eizenstat was Jimmy Carter's Frances Perkins.

Let me explain that Stuart Eizenstat, who was President Carter's chief domestic policy advisor, performed the same role in the Carter Administration that Frances Perkins, who was FDR's Secretary of Labor, did in his Administration.

According to Eizenstat, President Carter, who lost his re-election campaign in 1980 to Ronald Reagan, in a landslide, was a much better, and more important President than most people think: "It is conventional wisdom that Jimmy Carter was a weak and hapless president. But I believe that the single term served by the thirty-ninth president of the United States was one of the most consequential in modern history. Far from a failed presidency, he left behind concrete reforms and long-lasting benefits to the people of the United States as well as the international order."

I agree! Among his domestic policy accomplishments, President Carter helped save Chrysler and New York City from bankruptcy by providing federal loan guarantees, while insisting on management changes and concessions by workers, which brought the automaker, and America's largest city, back to financial health.

President Carter doubled the size of the National Park system; laid the foundation for the establishment of solar, wind and other alternative energy industries, and enacted the Superfund law to clean up lands contaminated by pollution.

President Carter deregulated the airline, trucking and railroad industries, deregulated crude oil and natural gas prices (tied to a windfall profits tax), and ended federal caps on interest rates that banks could pay – stimulating the American economy. President Carter also championed the Regulatory Flexibility Act, which required federal agencies to eliminate unnecessary regulatory burdens on small business.

Even though the economy grew about as much during the Carter Administration as it did during the Reagan Administration, Carter had the bad luck to inherit an economy buffeted by "stagflation" -- double digit inflation rates (caused by the borrow

and spend policies of Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford), accompanied by high unemployment. In order to tame inflation, Carter courageously appointed Paul Volcker as Chairman of the Federal Reserve in 1979; with Carter's support, Volcker raised interest rates and took other steps that finally brought inflation – which was 14.8% in 1980 – under control, despite the unpopularity of Volcker's policies.

The perception among many Americans during the 4 years of the Carter Administration that inflation was out of control, reflected a perception among many Americans of a lack of control within the Carter White House, as Eizenstat (who worked for President Johnson), explains: "In an overreaction to the excesses of Watergate and Nixon's centralization of power, Carter initially decided not to have a chief of staff. Except for me, not one senior [Carter] aide had ever before set foot in the White House, lived in Washington, or knew anything about the operations of the U.S. Congress of the massive federal government."

Part of Carter's appeal, as a Presidential candidate, was that he wasn't from Washington – he had served in the Georgia State Senate, and then served a single term as Governor. While ignorance can produce bliss in some circumstances, if you're elected President, it helps to have staff members who have worked in the White House before and know how it should – and how it shouldn't – operate.

On foreign and defense policy, President Carter had huge successes: He championed human rights abroad, he was personally responsible for getting Egypt and Israel to agree to a peace treaty, he normalized diplomatic relations with Communist China, he successfully negotiated a peaceful transfer of the Panama Canal to Panama, and, after the Russians invaded Afghanistan, he began a military buildup that Ronald Reagan continued.

However, those accomplishments were quickly forgotten when Americans were confronted by the seizure, by Iranian radicals, of the American embassy in Teheran after the Shah of Iran was overthrown in 1979. The embassy seizure was precipitated by Carter's decision to admit the Shah, who was suffering from cancer and could not get adequate treatment elsewhere, into the United States. Although Carter had received assurances from the nominal Iranian government that the embassy would not be endangered if the U.S. admitted the Shah, the nominal government did not control the radicals who were aligned with Ayatollah Khomeini, who became the de facto leader of Iran after the Shah left.

The attempted rescue of the embassy hostages, in April 1980, which had to be aborted after a plane and a helicopter on the ground in Iran collided, perpetuated the perception that Carter was a bumbling, indecisive President, and aided Senator Ted Kennedy's primary challenge to Carter in 1980.

Part of President Carter's political problems stemmed from being too ambitious – and too cold, personally. According to Eizenstat, "Carter was so determined to confront intractable problems that he came away at times seeming like a public scold – a nanny telling her charges to eat their spinach."

Ronald Reagan, with his sunny optimism and warm, charismatic personality, defeated Jimmy Carter in 1980 when he asked Americans, during the televised debate he had with Carter in October 1980, "Are you better off today than you were four years ago?" Americans, resoundingly decided that they would be better off with Reagan as President: Carter only carried 6 states in 1980.

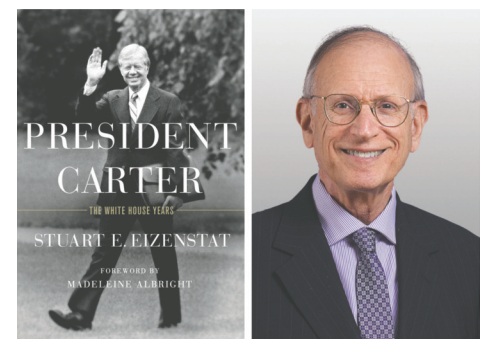
Since leaving office in 1981, Jimmy Carter, and his wife, Rosalynn, have become popular and well respected figures; they established the Carter Center in Atlanta, where they help mediate international disputes, and they work with Habitat for Humanity to build houses for the poor.

President Carter: The White House Years is a combination of biography, history, and memoir; the book is organized topically, not chronologically, which allowed Eizenstat to explain how policies developed over the Carter administration.

Stuart Eizenstat, whom I met at the FDR Library (where he serves on the Board of Trustees) in October, 2018, has written an important book, which is highly accurate factually and which really explains why Jimmy Carter is a dramatically underrated and underappreciated President. A big part of President Carter's success was due to having Stuart Eizenstat as his chief domestic policy adviser.

I sent Stuart Eizenstat some questions to answer; the questions, and his answers, are below:

Continued on Next Page →



1. I think the Carter Administration would have been much more successful if someone with the caliber of Robert Strauss had been appointed as chief of staff in January 1977; what do you think?

One of the principal mistakes President Carter made at the beginning of his presidency was not to appoint any chief of staff, but to be his own. It was not until midway in his presidency that he was finally persuaded to appoint a chief of staff, and then it was Hamilton Jordan, his gifted top political adviser, but someone without any previous Washington experience. As a result, in the crucial early months of the Carter presidency, there was no experienced White House chief of staff to set clear priorities (we had a host of competing priorities--economic stimulus, comprehensive energy reform, welfare reform, water projects, transportation deregulation, SALT II negotiations, the Panama Canal, Middle East peace process, etc.) and to integrate the political and policy perspectives.

Ronald Reagan learned this lesson, appointing James Baker as his chief of staff, even though Baker had been the campaign manager for George H.W. Bush, who became his vice president.

Even without a chief of staff, if President Carter had appointed a Washington wise man like Robert Strauss, former chairman of the Democratic National Committee, as a senior White House adviser, it would have made a big difference. Bob would have helped President Carter navigate the political shoals and helped him keep his fractious Democratic base in line.

Even with this, however, it is important to note that two independent surveys (The Miller Center for the Study of the Presidency and National Journal) give President Carter among the highest marks of any modern president for success with Congress on his major proposals, just under the legendary Lyndon Johnson (on whose White House Staff I served from 1967-1968).

2. You repeatedly state in your book that a big part of President Carter's problems was that he tried to do too much, too soon, and didn't set priorities. How do you think Carter could have done better at setting priorities?

President Carter's nature was to tackle every major problem he saw regardless of the political costs. While he achieved much success, compared to what he proposed, it seemed pale in comparison. Moreover, he favored comprehensive solutions, when our political system is geared to incremental progress. By having an experienced White House Chief of Staff or top White House adviser, priorities could have been set. At many Democratic congressional leadership

breakfasts, Speaker Tip O'Neill and Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd, urged him to give them his top priorities so they could sort-out his proposals, but he replied that if he did that, interest groups would be angry that their top priority was not considered.

3. What, if anything, should President Carter have done differently about Iran after the Shah was overthrown?

There could have been a more aggressive effort to prevent Ayatollah Khomeini from leaving his exile in France to return to Tehran. There were confusing signals because of policy differences between U.S. Ambassador to Iran William Sullivan (who President Carter urged Secretary of State Vance to fire), Secretary of State Vance and National Security Adviser Brzezinski about the use of force. The President sent General Huyser to be his emissary to rally the divided Iranian military to back the Shah's last appointed prime minister Bakhtiar, but Sullivan diluted his message.

When the hostages were captured, I argued for an immediate blockade (or mining) of Kharg Island, where most of Iran's oil was exported. For sure, this had its own risks, including the Soviet Union attempting to challenge the blockade or Iran blocking the Straits of Hormuz. But a clear signal to Iran that the capture of our hostages was an act of war, would have been useful. Instead, the President met with the hostage families and told them that his top priority was getting their loved ones back safely, and he chose negotiations. In fairness, the Iranian revolution was a new phenomenon and it was unclear that the radical clerics were the real power, not the government, with whom agreements were reached that Khomeini vetoed. The fact is that Carter did inform Iran that if there were any show trials or if any hostage was harmed there would be an immediate military response, which is why neither happened (although there "show" executions where our hostages did not know if they would be killed).

4. Did President Carter consider preventing Iranian diplomats and their families who were in the United States from returning to Iran until the American embassy hostages were freed (as the United States did with German and Italian diplomats in 1941)?

No, but he did issue an Executive Order expelling all Iranians and Iranian diplomats from the United States. But he did not want to breach international law as the Iranians had done with our diplomat, by keeping them as hostages. This would have had little impact on the radical clerics, who had disdain for the diplomats who had served under the Shah.

5. What do you like best about Jimmy Carter, and what do you like least about him?

There are many things. He was honest and brought integrity to the White House in the wake of the Watergate scandal, removing its stain from the Oval Office, and passing major ethics legislation in place today. He was trustworthy and brought Americans together, reaching out to minorities and women with historic levels of appointments to senior executive positions and judgeships. I also admired his willingness to take on challenges like our energy dependence on OPEC oil, the Panama Canal Treaty, the Middle East peace process, normalization of relations with China, that were politically unpopular but important for the country.

I also greatly appreciated President Carter making human rights a central feature of his foreign policy during the Cold War battle with the Soviet Union for the hearts and minds of the world, and applying it equally to the Soviet Union and to the military dictators in Latin America. Also, President Carter strengthened our alliances and believed that working with our European, Japanese and North American allies helped the U.S. achieve its objectives abroad. Moreover, President Carter was personally very kind to me, my wife Fran, and my sons Jay and Brian. He allowed us (along with his senior staff) to use Camp David on weekends and even asked my son Jay to jog with him at Camp David.

One of his most courageous decisions, for which he gets no credit to this day, was deciding going into a reelection year to appoint Paul Volcker as chairman of the Federal Reserve, knowing in advance from Volcker that he was going to adopt a tight monetary policy to squeeze out the high inflation that bedeviled Nixon, Ford and Carter, that would raise interest rates and unemployment that would hurt his chances for reelection. But he told us he had tried everything else to curb inflation (which jumped to double digits because of the oil cutoff from Iran during the revolution) and that he did not want his legacy to the country to be persistently high inflation, even if it meant his defeat in 1980. By letting Volcker do his job, without interference, inflation dropped like a rock--by the end of Reagan's first year in office. This is emblematic of much of what Carter did, whose benefits occurred later and to the political benefit of his successors. We have low inflation today because of what Carter and Volcker did in 1979-1980.

There is nothing I dislike about him. But I wished he had done more to personalize his relations with key Members of Congress, to strengthen his relationship with the Democratic Party base, and had done more to set early priorities.