

NATIONAL REVIEW

‘Government Cannot Solve Our Problems’

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“I am a farmer, an engineer, a businessman, a planner, a scientist, a governor, and a Christian.”

With these words, Jimmy Carter introduced himself to the country as a candidate for the presidency on December 12, 1974. It would be unusual for a Democrat to enter his party’s presidential primaries in such a fashion today, but back then the major parties hadn’t yet fully settled into their current ideological corners, and the most conservative Democrats were not yet to the left of the most liberal Republicans. Back then, there was still space in the tent — if only barely — for a fiscally conservative former naval officer who was pro-life, taught Sunday school, and distrusted unions.

In his new book, *President Carter: The White House Years*, Stuart Eizenstat, who served as the chief domestic-policy adviser to Carter, tracks the 39th president’s political career from Georgia through his single-term presidency. It’s a deep dive into the functions of the presidency — filled with the minutiae of politics and bureaucracy, showing successes and failures alike.

Eizenstat takes the reader through the changing functions of the vice presidency, through diplomatic negotiations, through the dismantling of top-down control of industry, and through the fight against inflation. Though he describes himself as having been one of the liberals in the administration, he is fair-minded and writes with an appreciation of the ideological diversity on Carter’s staff.

Books with this much detail are often dense, almost more accessible as repositories of information than as stories to be enjoyed. But Eizenstat’s is the exception: His prose is eminently readable, partly, I think, because he endeavored to depict the political process from his own perspective. He does a good job laying out the political culture of the time, both in Georgia and the country at large, and in doing so makes the book that much more pleasant for readers who were not around for the Carter years or too young to really experience them.

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Perhaps the most striking aspect of the political landscape Eizenstat depicts is its robust respect for separation of powers. “For all its majesty, the presidency has few constitutional powers beyond that of commander in chief of the armed forces,” he writes. “The power of the office

comes from his ability to influence others to follow his lead – Congress, friends, and foes foreign and domestic, and above all the American public.” Where a modern president would use “a pen and phone” to effect policy, however unconstitutionally, the Carter administration worked with Congress to achieve its legislative goals. Some of its failed initiatives, such as welfare reform, would come to fruition in Congress during later administrations. Persuasion can take time.

There is a tendency in our political culture to assume that Carter must have been “far-left” because he was followed by Ronald Reagan, who inspiringly spoke of the liberating power of the market and against the evils of Communism. But this isn’t quite right. Indeed, Reagan didn’t disagree with his predecessor on everything. Not only was Carter a fiscal conservative and deficit hawk (much to the ire of Democratic party leaders), but he was perhaps the greatest deregulator of his political era.

Until the Carter years, much of the economy, including air travel, brewing, oil, telecommunications, rail shipping, and commercial trucking, had been subject to severe government control — to the point that government officials made virtually all of the major decisions. This setup made services prohibitively expensive but guaranteed profits for big businesses by keeping out new competitors. The Carter administration, by focusing on free-market reforms and appointing deregulators to head up regulatory agencies, made a big dent in the problem.

The deregulation of the 1970s brought together an interesting and shifting coalition of supporters. Democrats Ted Kennedy and Ralph Nader joined Carter in his effort to open up the airline industry, though both would turn against him when he embarked on deregulation of the oil industry. His opponents, too, were not quite the people one might expect. The Teamsters union was so angered by Carter’s deregulation of the trucking industry that its members endorsed Ronald Reagan to signal their opposition.

In his first State of the Union address, President Carter said:

Government cannot solve our problems, it can’t set our goals, it cannot define our vision. Government cannot eliminate poverty or provide a bountiful economy or reduce inflation or save our cities or cure illiteracy or provide energy. And government cannot mandate goodness.

There is a deep contrast between this perspective and that conveyed by Donald Trump’s “I alone can fix it” or Barack Obama’s “Life of Julia” ad campaign, which attempted to show the government as the primary force in people’s lives. Carter’s words were dispositionally conservative, in that they recognized a fundamentally limited role for government, let alone for the president himself. Today, presidents are expected to opine on every issue — despite the relatively limited mandate of the presidency — and to relish doing so. Carter rightfully thought that was not the president’s place.

Eizenstat makes the case for the Carter presidency as “one of the most consequential in modern history” without glossing over its shortcomings, some of which were a direct product of its populist, outsider character. He posits a continuity between Carter’s reforms and the Reagan revolution, and, from this historical distance, the record seems to bear him out. Readers might be surprised to see the Carter administration depicted as much more conservative than is popularly imagined, and might find themselves reevaluating Carter’s stewardship of the nation. But even if they aren’t, *President Carter* is a worthwhile read.

