

“A Different Type of President”

Interviewee: Stuart Eizenstat

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Stuart Eizenstat, assistant to the president for domestic affairs and policy, reflected on President Jimmy Carter’s relationship to politics and how it influenced his decision-making style.

Stuart Eizenstat: We used to always joke that the worst way to convince the President to go along with your position was to say that this would help you politically, because I think this arose out of a deep-seated feeling that was very much a part of the campaign, which we’ve discussed in some detail. He wanted to be a different type of President. He was elected somehow to be a different type of President. He was manning against the system of inside deals and so forth. He saw himself above that system. He did not enjoy politics per se in the same sense that a Humphrey and a Johnson did. I mean, they reveled in the ability to be political in the broadest sense of the term. And President Carter—I can’t psychoanalyze him, but I mean to my observation—didn’t really enjoy the political process. It’s not something that came naturally to him. He liked to make a decision on the merits, and check the decision box that seemed to him the best direction for the nation to go, and that is his strength.

That was an enormous strength, and has an enormous amount of intellectual integrity. It was also, however, a liability at times, because you can’t always simply check the right box. You’ve got to make compromises sometimes so that overall you’re able to move forward even though it appears it’s one step backwards to go two steps forward.

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