Review: 'A Full Life: Reflections at Ninety,' by Jimmy Carter; no apologies

NONFICTION: Best viewed as a supplement to “Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President,” Jimmy Carter’s new memoir provides more information and insights about his personal life and values than on U.S. politics and public policy.

By GLENN C. ALTSCHULER () Special to the Star Tribune | JULY 25, 2015 — 2:00PM

Thirty-five years after he lost his bid for a second term as president, Jimmy Carter remains active and outspoken. Through the Carter Center, he engages in conflict resolution, monitors elections and promotes arms control, environmental reform, education and global health. He works for Habitat for Humanity. He has written more than two dozen books, including “Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid.” And he has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

In “A Full Life,” Carter reflects on nine decades of experiences, including his upbringing in rural Georgia; his stint as a naval officer, working for Hyman Rickover in developing nuclear energy; his success as a peanut farmer; his fight against racial discrimination; his political career as state senator, governor of Georgia and in the White House, and his varied and voluminous accomplishments.

Best viewed as a supplement to “Keeping Faith,” his memoir of his tenure in the Oval Office, “A Full Life” provides more interesting information and insights about Carter’s personal life and values than about U.S. politics and public policy.

Indeed, Carter devotes just a few pages to the Camp David accords and the Iran hostage crisis and does not discuss the problem of “stagflation” or acknowledge the downside to deregulation. Nor does he accept responsibility for his travails in office.

The news media, he writes, suspected that he “had something unsavory to hide” and could not abide having a governor from the Deep South as president. He maintains that women’s rights activists and labor leaders, “with whom I felt most friendly and whom I attempted to help,” caused him the most trouble.

On less overtly political issues, Carter lets his guard down. He indicates, for example, that he cannot now understand or justify his failure to consult Rosalynn, his wife, early in their marriage on decisions affecting the family, including resigning from the Navy, dividing his father’s estate and running for political office. He confesses that arguments with Rosalynn during the drafting of their book, “Everything to Gain,” grew so heated that they communicated only through harsh e-mails and ultimately decided to label each paragraph “J” or “R.”

As “A Full Life” makes clear, Carter retains resentments. Ted Kennedy, he suggests, may have kept him from being re-elected. Ronald Reagan instructed diplomats not to assist him or acknowledge his presence. President Obama has kept his distance, Carter speculates, because he fears a backlash from pro-Israeli American Jews.

Jimmy Carter is a remarkable man who can legitimately look back on a remarkably productive life. Even at age 90, however, this decent and deeply religious man is not always able to forget — or forgive.

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