Lessons from the Thirteen Days in September

On the atmosphere, negotiating style, and mistakes made at Camp David

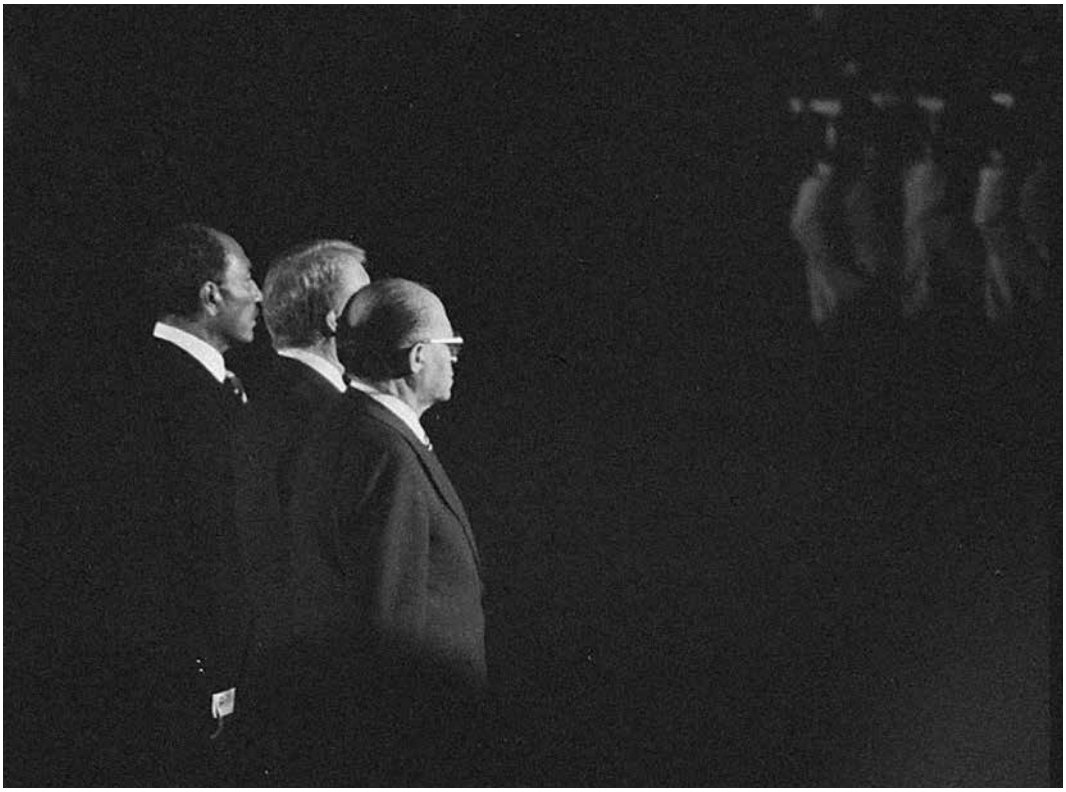
By Lawrence Wright

Menachem Begin returned, triumphant, from Camp David, the president of Israel, Yitzhak Navon, asked him, "How did you succeed where previous prime ministers have failed?"

Begin replied, "It's all in the timing."

One of the lessons of Camp David is that timing had little to do with it. Yes, each side had incentives to seek peace in 1978, but those incentives were always present, even as Israel and Egypt collided in one war after another. The Yom Kippur War had shaken Israel out of its smug reverie of unchallenged dominance and changed the context, but peace had been available as an alternative to war from the beginning of the conflict in 1948. There were no insoluble issues standing between Egypt and Israel. Egypt chose to identify with the Arabs who rejected a small Jewish state, and so it gambled on war as a more definitive solution than peaceful negotiation. The Arabs lost that bet, and Israel grew larger and became an even greater threat. Each war planted the seeds for the next one. Each defeat made the Arabs more resolute, more defiant. Peace became contemptible. But in the case of Egypt and Israel, it was always a possibility. Egypt had to decide whether to act in its own interests or as the champion of a larger Arab cause. Israel had to sacrifice territory that provided a buffer against a sudden attack but also enlarged the imagined final borders of Greater Israel.

The dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians is different, and that's why it remains unresolved, although Camp David was supposed to have brought that conflict to a permanent end. The War of Independence in 1948 expanded the territory that the new Jewish state claimed, including nearly 60 percent of the area designated for the stillborn nation of Palestine, the remainder being taken over by Jordan. Arab refugees flooded into neighboring countries, and Israel locked the door behind them. Instead of being digested by other Arab societies, the refugees became a destabilizing presence and a source of radicalism and terror that plagued the whole world. Except for



Δ Presidents Jimmy Carter and Anwar Sadat, along with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, at Camp David, Sept. 6, 1978. *Marion S. Trikosko/Library of Congress*

Jordan, the Arab states have avoided absorbing the Palestinian refugees in order to keep the conflict alive. The numerous attempts to bring this conflict to an end have failed because of the absence of political courage on both sides to accept the sacrifices that peace would entail.

Isolation allowed the negotiators to work creatively, explore alternatives, concentrate on a single task, and take risks that might not be ventured in the public eye. Jimmy Carter had thought that the cloistered environment would allow trust to develop between the two leaders that would cause them to brush aside small obstacles in order to reach the larger goal. In this, he was quite wrong. The intimacy of Camp David amplified the hostility between Begin and Anwar Sadat, which repeatedly threatened to torpedo the talks. And yet, neither man could leave without paying a terrible political price. They were trapped. As the days passed, isolation became a stronger incentive to reach a deal simply because they could not stand being there any longer. Despite the shuttered environment they worked in, each of these three men knew that the bright light of history was shining on them, and that what they did or failed to do here would outweigh any other measure of their extraordinary lives.

Camp David was unusual in that it was conducted by the leaders of each country and not by subordinates. Nothing had been agreed to in advance. The risk that these men took reflected the courage that they brought to the negotiation. Their personal prestige was on the line. There was no guarantee of even partial success; indeed, it began to seem that the impending failure of the talks was only going to make things worse. But it was crucial to the success of the summit that these men had the authority to make a deal. Every concession was consequential. This alarmed the Egyptian foreign minister, Mohamed Ibrahim Kamel, who ran out of ways to bridle Sadat. "With Carter leading the United States delegation to Camp David, the confrontation was no more between Sadat and Begin only but rather involved some sort of confrontation between Sadat and the United States President," he wrote. "The success or failure of the Conference, in the eyes of the world, added up to success or failure for Carter." He worried that Sadat and Begin would wind up conceding what did not belong to them—the rights of the Palestinians—in order to placate the American president.

There would be no peace treaty without Carter's unswerving commitment to bring this conflict to an end. He was fueled by his religious belief that God had put him in office in part to bring peace to the Holy Land. Egypt and Israel simply could not make peace without the presence of a trusted third party; and in truth, there was no other candidate as sufficiently powerful and impartial as the United States to fill that role. And yet, until Carter, no American president had been willing to risk his prestige and perhaps his office to pursue such a distant goal.

The American team incorporated the idea of a single negotiating text, which Carter controlled. This allowed him to lock in gains and gradually pare down the points of disagreement. Carter also schooled himself in the history and geography of the region. His obsession with minutiae had become a subject of ridicule—notably, he was said to monitor which staff members signed up for the White House tennis courts—but in the case of Camp David his ability to absorb information allowed him to see past the hazards and ruses that such bare-knuckled negotiations often employ.

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However, Carter came to Camp David under the spell of an illusion, seeing his role as that of a facilitator, a kind of camp counselor helping two quarreling parties understand each other better. He had thought that the leaders would discover the inherent goodness in each other and would willingly work out their differences. That illusion shattered within minutes of the first meeting of the three men. Carter floundered, stunned by the open hostility. Unable to referee the argument, he had to separate the Egyptian

and the Israeli. They could not escape the history that had created them in order to see into the soul of the other. Only Carter could do that. His role had to change, which meant that he, too, had to change. He had to free himself of his Christian-inspired conception of human nature and accept a more tragic, Old Testament view of behavior. They needed him to be stronger than they were. He would have to force them to make the peace they both wanted but could not achieve on their own.

The change in Carter's role became evident on the sixth day, after the trip to Gettysburg, when Carter presented the first American draft of an agreement. He quite forcefully stated that Begin would be blamed if the talks failed. Similarly, on the eleventh day, when Sadat had ordered a helicopter to take him and his team back to Washington, Carter brought the weight of his office down hard, threatening to break off relations with Egypt and end their personal friendship. Carter made it clear to both men that if either of them deserted the process, they would have a problem with the United States—a problem neither man could afford. By taking an aggressive stance as a full partner to the negotiations, Carter allowed each side to make concessions to the United States that they couldn't make to each other.

Carter was aided by a unified American delegation that never broke into factions. Cyrus Vance and Zbigniew Brzezinski, in particular, had many territorial spats during their time in the Carter administration, but none of that was on display at Camp David. The entire delegation was focused and tireless, in the model of their leader. The Egyptian and Israeli delegations, on the other hand, were disparate examples of the societies they represented. Sadat ruled over a team that was powerless but mainly united against him. The Israeli team was divided, reflective of the diverse and contentious Israeli political system, but its members were largely more in favor of peace than their leader was. Begin may have chosen them for that quality. They helped him overcome his lifelong antipathy to making any concession at all.

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Ambiguity played a double role at Camp David. Careful language was the key to making peace between Egypt and Israel, but vague phrases about negotiations with the Palestinians opened up escape clauses that Begin exploited. Carter successfully employed constructive ambiguity to overcome Begin's horror of UN Resolution 242 by simply taking it out of the main text and placing it in the appendix, where it was still a formal part of the treaty. Similarly, in the side letter on Jerusalem, Carter invoked the policy statements of two American ambassadors without actually quoting their language. When Carter traveled to

Israel to try to finish the agreement, Begin implied that he would be open-handed in dealing with Palestinian demands, but refused to be specific. The Israelis did concede that the Palestinians had "legitimate rights" and should be given "full autonomy," but they refused to accept the term "self-determination" in connection with Palestinian rights. Vance believed that was about as much as could be hoped for. The failure to make a more explicit link between the comprehensive peace treaty, encompassing the West Bank and Gaza, with the separate peace between Israel and Egypt would essentially doom Palestinian national aspirations. "Sadat has sold Jerusalem, Palestine, and the rights of the Palestinian people for a handful of Sinai sand," Yasser Arafat commented bitterly. (Arafat proceeded to boycott the autonomy talks, ensuring that the Palestinians would not be able to influence their future, but neither the Israelis nor the Americans wished to have them involved.) Sadat's ambivalence on the subject of the Palestinians made it difficult for Carter to prosecute their case more forcefully, although he would come to regret the abandonment of the Palestinian cause by all parties to the agreement, including Egypt.

There was no fixed deadline at Camp David when it began; but, of course, no one expected that it would drag on for thirteen days. Begin was particularly opposed to deadlines. He was a master of pulling small matters to the surface and dwelling on them while the hour hand made its leisurely circles. By the eleventh day, a Friday, Carter decided that he could not invest more time in the summit. He asked Begin and Sadat to prepare their final suggestions, as the summit would end on Sunday no matter what the outcome. The deadline forced the delegations to concentrate on getting to a final agreement, but in the crush of negotiation on Saturday night a crucial mistake was made. Either through misunderstanding or deceit or sober second thoughts, Begin did not produce the letter on halting settlement construction that Carter thought he had agreed to. Alone among the participants at Camp David, Aharon Barak suggested that the negotiators remain until the Palestinian issue was resolved and the comprehensive peace that Carter sought had been achieved. That would have required the Israelis to commit to withdrawing from the Occupied Territories and permitting free elections and a Palestinian self-governing authority with real control. It seems unlikely that Begin would have committed to such steps, no matter how long he was confined on that woodsy hilltop in Maryland. Instead, he ran out the clock.

Of the three men, perhaps only Carter genuinely believed from the beginning that a peace agreement could actually be achieved. Sadat was negotiating mainly to supplant Israel as America's best friend in the region. Peace was a highly desirable outcome, but if the talks failed because of Israeli intransigence, that would boost Egypt's standing with the most powerful nation in the world. "This will end in Begin's downfall!" Sadat predicted to his delegation. The Israelis really did not understand what they were getting into. Begin arrived at

Camp David expecting it to last two or three days at most, and to end with no more than a promise for future talks. No one in the Israeli delegation imagined that they would wind up surrendering Sinai settlements and fully withdrawing from the peninsula. Begin's main goal was to avoid the blame for failure. In the end, the only way he could do that was to allow the summit to succeed.

Sadat got back Sinai, including the oil fields, which he had not been able to do through war. Egypt did endure the shunning of its neighbors, but that did not last. "The Arabs cannot isolate Egypt," Sadat observed haughtily; "they can only isolate themselves." He was right about that. By 1984, the Arab embassies began to reopen in Cairo, although Sadat was not alive to see his prophecy come true.

Begin was seen as the stronger negotiator at Camp David, but the Israelis had to surrender something valuable and tangible—land—in return for something ephemeral and reversible—peace. Israel counted as victories things that were not a part of the treaty: for instance, there was no mention of a Palestinian state or self-determination; there was no insistence on Israeli military withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza; there was no agreement on Jerusalem. Begin's fierce tactics at Camp David and beyond ensured that Israel would continue to occupy the West Bank and that the settlements would never stop. It also meant that the comprehensive peace that might have been achieved at Camp David would continue to elude Israel. The Palestinians got little except for a vague promise to respect their "legitimate rights." In signing the treaty with Israel, Egypt severed its link to the Palestinian cause. Without a powerful Arab champion, Palestine became a mascot for Islamists and radical factions who could only do further damage to the prospects of a peaceful and just response to themisery of an abandoned people.

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The unresolved issues of Camp David have not gone away, but the success of the summit is measured by its durability. Since the signing of the treaty between Israel and Egypt in 1979, there has not been a single violation of the terms of the agreement. It is impossible to calculate the value of peace until war brings it to an end. ℟