

## **Thirteen Days in September: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David**

Book Review

By Barry Alfonso

With an eye for both the grand sweep of history and its small, telling details, Lawrence Wright recounts the efforts of Jimmy Carter, Anwar Sadat and Menachem Begin to forge a lasting Middle East peace in *Thirteen Days in September*. Besides being a nearly moment-by-moment account of how the 1978 Camp David Accords came to be written, the book offers fascinating individual portraits of the three leaders who signed them. Carter, Sadat and Begin come alive as vivid, very human figures, even as Mr. Wright gives the reader a sense of the larger issues at stake.

The American President, the Egyptian President and the Israeli Prime Minister each felt they had a role to play in a divinely-ordained plan for humanity. Competing visions of how land and power were to be shared in the Middle East divided them profoundly, however. Mr. Wright further suggests that each man's personality and life experiences made any working relationship difficult at best.

Sadat is portrayed as a risk-taking visionary, an "alarmingly grandiose" figure who saw himself as a latter-day pharaoh. As a young officer in Egypt, he attempted to collude with Nazi spies and was sent to prison by the British. Sadat grew into a gifted statesman over the decades. After gaining the presidency, he steered Egypt away from Soviet influence and towards the U.S. Jimmy Carter claimed to feel closer to Sadat than any other world leader.

In contrast to Sadat's bold, flamboyant persona, Begin comes across as "secretive, legalistic, afraid of change." Some of the book's most dramatic passages concern the Israeli leader's rise from Holocaust and Soviet gulag survivor to Jewish revolutionary and maverick politician. His volatile personality combined stubbornness with a fierce determination to defend the Jewish people at all cost. To Mr. Wright, he "embodied the most wounded and aggressive qualities of the Israeli psyche."

Carter emerges from the book as a somewhat elusive figure. "Intelligent but impersonal," his engineer's mind found it hard to acknowledge the role of the irrational in decision-making. Carter believed that "God wanted him to bring peace" to the Arabs and Israelis and he was willing to gamble the future of his presidency to achieve his goal. Mr. Wright depicts him as an outsider to world politics who attempts to bring Sadat and Begin together by sheer force of will.

Mr. Wright spices up his account with sharply-drawn sketches of Camp David's supporting players. Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Dayan emerges as a complex figure with both "an avidity for killing" and a sincere desire for peace with Egypt. Egyptian Deputy Prime Minister Hassan Tohamy – a Sufi mystic who practiced astral projection and talked with dead saints – contrasts with the secularly-minded Sadat. First Lady Rosalynn Carter stands out for her quiet tenacity and sound judgment amidst the wild mood swings of the negotiating teams.

Several pivotal scenes leap out from the narrative. Begin's cool composure breaks down during a visit to Gettysburg National Park. Carter's blue eyes "blaze" with fury during an argument with

Sadat. A thoughtful gift from Carter keeps Begin from walking away from the conference at the last moment. Mr. Wright makes it clear that such small turning points were crucial in deciding Camp David's outcome.

Interspersed with the Camp David story is a concise, lucidly-told overview of Mideast events since World War Two, with side trips into the Old Testament. Mr. Wright is even handed in his account of Israeli history (and provocative when he points out the lack of archeological evidence for the events in the Books of Exodus and Joshua).

In the end, the Camp David Accords resulted in an enduring peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Less successful was the conference's attempt to begin a framework for resolving the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The outcome for the three leaders was decidedly mixed – Carter was defeated for re-election, Sadat was assassinated and Begin withdrew from politics following Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

*Thirteen Days in September* doesn't end on a note of false triumph. Mr. Wright reflects on both the breakthroughs made and opportunities missed at Camp David. He suggests that if the conference's legacy is unclear, the courage shown by Carter, Sadat and Begin is inarguable.

Barry Alfonso, a writer and independent scholar, lives in Swissvale ([alfonso.barry@gmail.com](mailto:alfonso.barry@gmail.com)).