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Jimmy Carter and the Camp David Myth

It was only by putting aside the Palestinian issue that Mideast peace progress was made.

By [ARTHUR HERMAN](#)

Will Jimmy Carter be President Barack Obama's role model on how to bring peace to the Middle East?

Some, especially in Israel, view that prospect with apprehension. Others, like Ralph Nader, have greeted the possibility with enthusiasm, urging Mr. Obama to rely on Mr. Carter's "wise and seasoned counsel" in dealings with the volatile region. After all, Mr. Carter is renowned as the master craftsman of the historic accord between Egypt's Anwar Sadat and Israel's Menachem Begin at Camp David in September 1978, which opened the way for a formal peace agreement three months later.

The myth of Camp David hangs heavy over American foreign policy, and it's easy to see why. Of all the attempts to forge a Middle East peace, the 1978 treaty between Egypt and Israel has proved the most durable. Mr. Carter's admirers extol Camp David as an example of how one man's vision and negotiating skill brought former enemies together at the peace table, and as proof that a president can guide America toward a kinder, humbler foreign policy. Camp David was indeed Mr. Carter's one major foreign policy accomplishment amid a string of disasters including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the rise of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and Ayatollah Khomeini's ascent in Iran.

But the truth about Camp David belies this myth. The truth is that Mr. Carter never wanted an Egyptian-Israeli agreement, fought hard against it, and only agreed to go along with the process when it became clear that the rest of his foreign policy was in a shambles and he desperately needed to log a success.

As presidential candidate, Jimmy Carter was sharply critical of the kind of step-by-step personal diplomacy which had been practiced by his predecessors Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. President Carter's preferred Middle East policy was to insist on a comprehensive settlement among all concerned parties -- including the Arab states' leading patron, the Soviet Union -- and to disparage Nixonian incrementalism.

Mr. Carter and his advisers all assumed that the key to peace in the region was to make Israel pull back to its pre-1967 borders and accept the principle of Palestinian self-determination in exchange for a guarantee of Israel's security. Nothing less than a comprehensive settlement, it was argued, could ward off future wars -- and there could be no agreement without the Soviets at the bargaining table. This was a policy that, if implemented, would have thrust the Cold War directly into the heart of Middle East politics. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger had strained to achieve the opposite.

Interestingly, the man who ultimately prevented this Carter-led calamity from unfolding was Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

After the Yom Kippur War of 1973, Sadat decided that Egypt needed to start from scratch in its relationship with Israel. Sadat found natural allies in Nixon and Mr. Kissinger after throwing out his Soviet patrons in 1972. With

American support, he came to a disengagement agreement with Israel in 1973, and again in 1975. The culmination of this process was Sadat's historic trip to Jerusalem in November 1977, where he discussed a separate peace between Egypt and Israel, and forestalled Mr. Carter's plan for a Geneva peace conference.

It was this trip -- not Camp David -- that marked the true seismic shift in Middle East relations since Israel's founding. It came as an unwelcome surprise to the Carter foreign policy team, who still wanted their grandiose Geneva conference. In fact, for the better part of 1977, as Israel and Egypt negotiated, the White House persisted in acting as if nothing had happened. Even after Sadat's trip to Jerusalem, Mr. Carter announced that "a separate peace agreement between Egypt and Israel is not desirable."

But by the autumn of 1978, the rest of Mr. Carter's foreign policy had crumbled. He had pushed through an unpopular giveaway of the Panama Canal, allowed the Sandinistas to take power in Nicaragua as proxies of Cuba, and stood by while chaos grew in the Shah's Iran. Desperate for some kind of foreign policy success in order to bolster his chances for re-election in 1980, Mr. Carter finally decided to elbow his way into the game by setting up a meeting between Sadat and Begin at Camp David.

The rest of the story is now the stuff of legend: For 13 days Mr. Carter acted as the go-between for the two leaders. Yet for all their bluster and intransigence in public, Begin and Sadat were more than ready for a deal once they understood that the U.S. would do whatever was necessary to stop the Soviet Union and its Arab allies, such as the PLO, from derailing a peace. An agreement was hammered out for an Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai, coupled with vague language about Palestinian "autonomy." The item Mr. Carter had really wanted on the agenda -- a Palestinian state -- was kept at arm's length.

Camp David worked because it avoided all of Mr. Carter's usual foreign policy mistakes, particularly his insistence on a comprehensive solution. Instead, Sadat and Begin pursued limited goals. The agreement stressed a step-by-step process instead of insisting on immediate dramatic results. It excluded noncooperative entities like Syria and the PLO, rather than trying to accommodate their demands. And for once, Mr. Carter chose to operate behind the scenes à la Mr. Kissinger, instead of waging a media war through public statements and gestures. (The press were barred from the Camp David proceedings).

Above all and most significantly, Camp David sought peace instead of "justice." Liberals say there can be no peace without justice. But to many justice means the end of Israel or the creation of a separate Palestinian state. Sadat and Begin, in the teeth of Mr. Carter's own instincts both then and now, established at Camp David a sounder principle for negotiating peace. The chaos and violence in today's Gaza proves just how fatal trying to advance other formulations can be.

The true story of Camp David is one of two ironies. The first is that, far from being a symbol of a more modest foreign policy, Camp David rested on an assertion of go-it-alone American power. Both Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush would be bitterly criticized later for following this winning technique. The second irony is that if any one man deserves credit for Camp David, it is not Jimmy Carter but Anwar Sadat. It was Sadat who managed to save Mr. Carter from himself and revealed the true secret about forging peace in the Middle East: The Palestinian issue is the doom, not the starting point, for lasting stability in the region.

Mr. Herman is the author of "Gandhi and Churchill: The Epic Rivalry That Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age" (Bantam, 2008).

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