

HA'ARETZ

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“An Honor Well Earned”

By Kenneth W. Stein

Inexplicably in 1978, the Nobel Peace Prize eluded Jimmy Carter. That year Israel's Menachem Begin and Egypt's Anwar Sadat, two of the three participants in negotiating the Camp David Accords, were honored. Few, including those on the Nobel Committee, knew that Begin and Sadat had met only three times during the fortnight they were sequestered at the presidential retreat.

Few knew that Carter hammered out the agreement between them. Decades of hopes for Arab-Jewish reconciliation overshadowed Carter's critical role: his keen intellect, dogged determination, attention to detail, writing skills, an ability to find nuanced compromises, and capacity to “sell” a compromise agreement to those grizzled nationalists.

Few knew that Carter's political will and courage cajoled Begin to accept the term “legitimate Palestinian rights,” and for Sadat to give up any linkage of future Egyptian-Israeli treaty and Israeli withdrawal from Sinai with movement toward a Palestinian state. Carter enjoyed the strategic advantage that Begin and Sadat did not particularly enjoy each other's company.

Years of bloodshed, Kissinger's plodding successes in obtaining Israeli–Egyptian and Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreements, the months of lingering media drama that emerged from Sadat's historic Jerusalem visit, and the gulping anticipation that came from the information black-out at the Camp David talks, appropriately elevated Begin and Sadat to Nobel recipient stature. Golda Meir was not sure. When I asked her in December 1977 if they deserved to win the prize she replied with a twinkle in her eye, “I don't know if they should get the Nobel, but they certainly deserve an Oscar.”

Typical of Carter's personality, he took little public credit for Camp David accomplishment, but maintaining a low public profile and doing good was Carter's modus operandi.

Unexpectedly, to him and his wife Rosalyn, the American people ended his public mandate in 1981. At age 56, Carter's public service was not finished. He relished the action, he had mediation and personal intervention skills that needed expression. As an ex-president he rejected

offers to be a university president, a corporate board advisor, or well-paid after dinner speaker. Instead, he opted to create the Carter Center in Atlanta. It evolved into his unique forum to speak out on an “unfinished” foreign policy agenda: human rights, arms control, Middle East peace, democracy in the Americas, eradication of diseases and other pressing issues afflicting the human condition. He used it as a vehicle to launch self-motivated parachute jumps into world trouble spots like Haiti, Sudan, North Korea, Nicaragua, and elsewhere.

Like Carter himself, the Center was action-oriented. With his activist role, the Center became a magnet for policy-makers, scholars, and diplomats not to discuss foreign policy issues, but to offer ways to resolve them.

As president and former president, Carter was not afraid to speak his mind. He certainly angered many Israeli political leaders by his public call for a Palestinian homeland and the need for Israel to consider negotiating with the PLO. In his post-presidential period, his outspoken style often perturbed, if not angered his successors in the White House. In 1982, when he plucked me from the Emory faculty as the first academic fellow of the Center and then its first Executive Director, he did not ask about my politics; he knew we shared a passion for the region and for wanting to end, or at least reduce, the Arab-Israeli conflict into something less virulent. Working for him is easy. Since he speaks his mind, he accepts and encourages bold candor. Disagreements never got in the way of our shared passion.

With a mind that absorbs vast amounts of information, capable of instant recall at the appropriate moment, you knew that what you wrote or briefed him, he would retain. How many times I have seen visitors from the Middle East leave a meeting shaking their heads about the depth of his knowledge on an issue? How many Arabs told us over the years, that the Palestinians missed a great opportunity in not accepting the Camp David Accords in 1978; they might have had a Palestinian state by 1983! His recognition and receipt of the Nobel Peace Prize is deserved and a long time in coming.

In addition, Carter has set the standard for excellence in public service for former America presidents, and perhaps for all former heads of state. It will be difficult—if not impossible—for anyone to match his commitment and success in promoting good. He did it without fanfare, the old-fashioned way; he earned it.

A little over a month from now, when Israeli’s remember the 25th anniversary of Sadat’s breakthrough visit to Jerusalem, they might appropriately consider how different Israel’s modern history would have

been had someone other than Carter had been the president of the United States at the time.

Dr. Stein is a professor of Contemporary Middle Eastern History and Israeli Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. His book, "Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace" (Routledge, 1999) is presently being translated into Hebrew for publication in 2003.