

THE MIAMI HERALD

VIEWPOINTSUNDAY, MARCH 15, 1992“Begin Transformed Mideast History”by Kenneth W. Stein

The death of former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin last Monday marked the passing of one of Israel's last founding fathers. Regardless of what one thought of him, his personal and political career personified the struggle of the Jewish people in the 20th Century: survival, rebirth and political recognition. His life was intertwined with the Holocaust, the establishment of Israel and the beginning of the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict -- the signing of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty on March 26, 1979. Begin's political present was determined by the Jewish past. Paramount in his every political thought was the preservation of Jewish life and Israeli political independence. On almost every occasion when he met a foreign leader, he lectured them about Jewish persecution and suffering at the hands of non-Jews through time. Personally, Begin experienced incarceration in Russian labor camps, saw family members die in Nazi gas chambers and violently rebelled against British imperial presence in Palestine so that Jews could have a sanctuary for themselves. Once Israel was created in 1948, Begin dedicated himself to the preservation of the Jewish state. After he became prime minister in May 1977 and welcomed Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Jerusalem the following November, he remained tenacious in his commitment to make no political compromises that would jeopardize Israeli or Jewish security. Though a 20th Century political leader, his style harked back to 19th Century romanticism. Begin was always formal, precise, charming and legalistic. He possessed a phenomenal memory and an analytical mind. His negotiating and oratorical skills made him a match for any rival. Friends and foes alike were forced to endure his pedantic and resolute style.

Begin possessed deeply held beliefs. Commitments and loyalty were outstanding characteristics. Rarely did he waver on matters of principle. He was staunchly anti-Communist, a fierce defender of democracy and a particular admirer of the American political system and the American presidency. President Carter, who mediated the Camp David Accords between Begin and Sadat, often said to me and to others that Begin showed the most courage at Camp David and made concessions that he said he would never make. When the peace treaty with Egypt hung in the balance in 1978 and 1979, he violated his basic principle never to dismantle Israeli settlements. Every U.S. president who dealt with Menachem Begin found him unyielding in his commitments to Israeli security, even at the cost of difficulties in the American-Israeli relationship. In his prime, Begin was seen by his admirers as the personification of political strength and an anti-establishment figure. Before becoming prime minister in 1977, Begin labored in political

opposition for 29 years. His great personal quest was to be accepted as a legitimate leader of Israel and the Jewish people. Begin possessed street appeal, particularly to those Jews who immigrated from Middle Eastern countries. He represented their extreme antagonisms against an Arab world that been inhospitable to them. He symbolized the outsider for portions of the Israeli electorate that felt under-privileged and distant from the social and economic mainstream. Begin's political opponents saw him as rigid, inflexible and an obstacle to the Middle East peace process. He would not yield in his determination to maintain Israeli control and to create settlements in the Golan Heights, the West Bank and greater Jerusalem. After Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, Begin immediately authored the idea of Palestinian autonomy. This concept became part of the September 1978 Camp David Accords, and remains the focus of negotiating debate between Israelis and the Jordanian-Palestinian delegation in the diplomatic aftermath of the 1991 Madrid Middle East peace conference. The Arab world saw him as a repugnant and uncompromising European Jew who could not understand Arab claims to the same land that Jews had dreamed about and prayed to return to for centuries. Begin's unbending public image was always compared to that of the warmer and more personable Anwar Sadat, who captured the sympathies of the world after his historic visit to Jerusalem. Begin's legacy for the United States and Israel was notable but controversial. His unwillingness to deal the Soviet Union into the peacemaking process and his acceptance of the U.S.-sponsored peace treaty with Egypt permitted Washington to remain as key choreographer in the Arab-Israeli negotiating process. Under Begin's stewardship, Israel annexed the Golan Heights, continued to build settlements in the territories captured in the June 1967 war, bombed the Iraqi nuclear reactor and invaded Lebanon twice. The second invasion in 1982 raised deep ethical questions in Israel about the abuse of Israeli power. In domestic matters Begin did not fare well. During his tenure as prime minister he failed to deal successfully with the very strong labor unions. He was neither an economist nor an administrator. He relied heavily upon advisers in these fields, persons whose policies were not always acceptable to the Israeli public. Along with the debacle in the Lebanon, labor stoppages, exorbitant inflation rates, budgetary problems and a carping cabinet contributed to his resignation in September 1983. Historically, the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, over which Begin presided, was a monumental event for Israeli longevity and for Palestinian identity. The treaty muted the question about Israeli acceptance by the Arab world, but accelerated the debate about what the Jewish state's eastern borders should be and how the Palestinians could express their legitimate political rights.

Begin left the condition of the Jewish people much better than he found it. He helped transform the fear of being Jewish in the Diaspora to

a sense of security in a majority Jewish state. He set Israel on the course of beginning the prolonged and arduous process of normalizing relations with its Arab neighbors, a truly historic transformation of Middle Eastern history.