

## **Lessons From Carter's Camp David Summit**

By William B. Quandt

President Jimmy Carter invited President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel to Camp David in the summer of 1978 for two main reasons. He was worried that the chance for Arab-Israeli peace was slipping away, and he was convinced that it was a waste of time to talk to anyone other than the top leaders who

could make the decisions. Carter's was an act of frustration as much as one of statesmanship.

Carter had initially thought that the Camp David Summit could be concluded within a few days. He seemed to feel that the sense of historical drama, the isolation, the press blackout, and his own personal involvement would cause Sadat and Begin to rise to the occasion and make peace. It did not work out that way. Instead, each came to the Summit with deep suspicions of the other party and a determination to sway the American mediator to his side. After the first few days, Sadat and Begin did not meet.

Carter, who had expected to be little more than a facilitator, ended up being a draftsman and a forceful persuader. He personally wrote the first version of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty. And on at least one occasion he resorted to quite blunt pressure on each of the leaders.

The most innovative technique that was used by the American side was "the single negotiating text." The Americans would produce a draft, show it to one side, get their reactions, and undertake to produce another draft that would take the expressed concerns into account. The new draft would be shown to the other side, with the same rules—they could comment on it, but not dictate changes. The understanding was that the Americans would keep on producing drafts as long as it took to narrow the differences. Some 27 drafts later, all but two major issues had been resolved, at which point Carter met with Sadat and then with Begin to try to forge the final agreement.

On the whole, the outcome of the negotiations was a success for Carter and for the parties. Within months, an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed and has been in effect ever since. But the Americans and Egyptians had hoped that a serious step toward Israeli-Palestinian peace could also be made, and that hope was not fulfilled. In fact, the one serious error at Camp David on the American side was the careless handling of a commitment by Begin to stop building settlements in the West Bank. Carter thought that Begin has promised a prolonged freeze; Begin said he had only agreed to a three-month pause. The dispute generated much ill will and distrust—and left both Carter and Sadat intensely frustrated, to say nothing of the Palestinians who had little reason to welcome Camp David without the settlement freeze.

### **Personal Presidential Leadership**

During the lengthy talks that preceded Camp David, and at Camp David itself, U.S. policy constantly had to adjust to two realities: (1) that events in the Middle East could not be easily controlled or influenced, so developments there frequently caught the Americans by surprise and obliged them to revise their strategies; and (2) that domestic American political realities intruded with particular force on the decision-making process regarding the Middle East. A President must simultaneously adjust his plans to the unpredictable twists and turns of Middle East politics and keep an eye on his domestic political base.

What seems possible and desirable in the first year of a President's term is likely to be seen as hopelessly ambitious by the third year. The result of these Middle East and domestic pressures is to move American policy away from grand designs with strong ideological content toward a less controversial, and less ambitious, middle ground that can win bipartisan public support, as well as acceptance by Arabs and Israelis. To do so, of course, is not always possible, as much as it might be politically desirable—so American policy toward the Middle East rarely manages to satisfy everyone that has an interest in shaping it. Presidents seem to tire of all the controversy generated by Middle East problems, and the seeming intractability of the issues is a source of much frustration.

The Camp David Accords demonstrate the limits of what in fact can be achieved by American-led diplomacy, even with a massive commitment of Presidential effort. But the Accords are also a reminder that diplomacy can produce results—if the will, the energy, and the creativity are there. The historical verdict on Camp David cannot be fully rendered, although with each passing year it seems to be more widely accepted as part of the new reality of the Middle East. By any standard, however, this remarkable adventure in summit diplomacy achieved more than most of its detractors have been willing to acknowledge, and less than its most ardent proponents have claimed.

