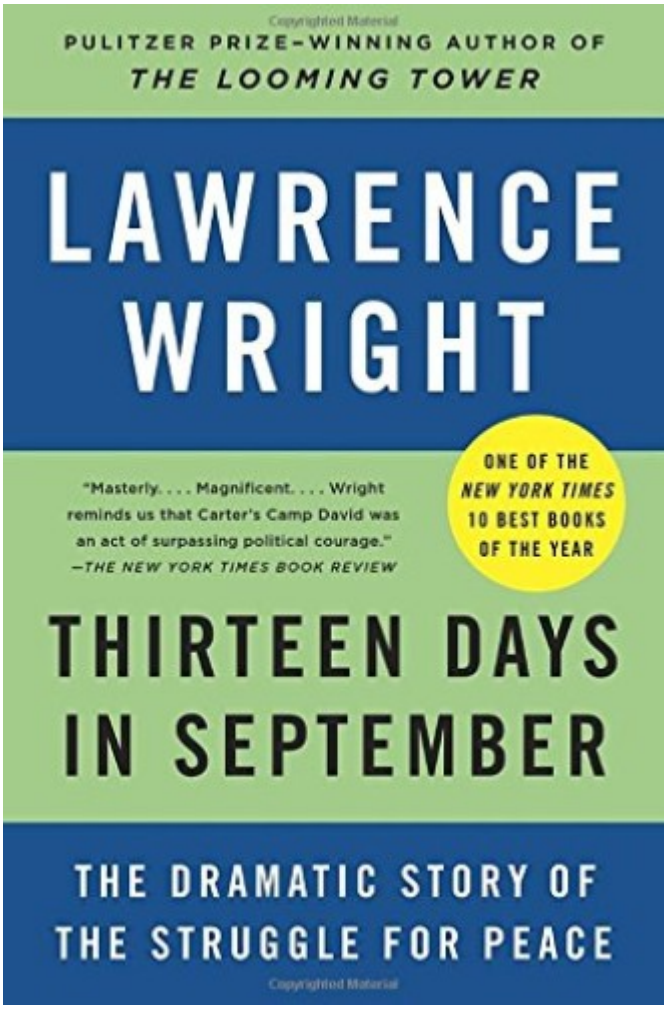
The price of peace

by Randall Balmer in the June 10, 2015 issue

In Review



Thirteen Days in September: The Dramatic Story of the Struggle for Peace

By Lawrence Wright
Penguin Random House

With the possible exception of Woodrow Wilson's attempt to organize the League of Nations, the most audacious diplomatic initiative of the 20th century was Jimmy Carter's gathering of Egyptian and Israeli leaders at Camp David in September 1978.

Each of the three heads of state—Carter, Menachem Begin of Israel, and Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt—had much at stake. For Begin, whose parents perished in the Holocaust and who saw himself as protector of his people, the security of Israel was paramount, but he did not want to be seen as an impediment to peace. Sadat's bold gesture of visiting Jerusalem in 1977 would be meaningless if it did not issue in some sort of agreement between Israel and Egypt, one that returned the Sinai to Egyptian control.

Carter too had a lot to lose. Beset by a sour economy and crushing interest rates, his presidency was foundering; already by spring 1978 more Americans disapproved than approved of his job performance. Members of Carter's own party were restive as they headed into the midterm elections.

But Carter was nothing if not resolute, and because of his own religious commitments the Middle East had long been a priority. Walter Mondale, his vice president, recalled that Carter had told him during his first day in office that he would pursue the matter, and Mondale had warned him against the Camp David initiative. "If you fail, we're done," Mondale told Carter. "We will sap our stature as national leaders. We've got to find some less risky way of trying to find peace there." Carter was undeterred, apparently willing to wager his entire presidency on the long odds of a breakthrough agreement between two historic enemies.

As Lawrence Wright nicely chronicles in *Thirteen Days in September*, the task before the president was daunting, and even Carter later acknowledged that "there was a curious fatalism about the process." As the delegations settled into Camp David, Carter sought to build on the close personal friendship he had forged with Sadat. Begin and Carter much admired each other's intellect, but they were more distant, and the Israeli prime minister was known for both his bluster and his intransigence. Even the prayer that Rosalynn Carter had drafted to open the summit (at the behest of Harold E. Hughes, U.S. senator from Iowa) was a matter of contention: Sadat immediately agreed, whereas Begin insisted on vetting the prose.

Wright nimbly interweaves his narrative of the ensuing 13 days with extended historical digressions that help frame the unprecedented nature of the summit. Like

so many Jews of his generation, Begin was seared by his memories of the Holocaust. His activities as a leader of the Irgun, including the bombing of the King David Hotel in 1946, would be labeled *terrorist* by any reasonable application of that term. Sadat, the military leader turned president, deeply resented the Israeli capture of Arab territories in the Six-Day War of 1967.

Throughout the Camp David summit, Carter wheedled and cajoled and sometimes scolded his guests. As was his wont, Carter had prepared meticulously for the occasion, poring over official positions and even psychological profiles of members of both delegations, but progress toward an agreement was slow, much to Carter's frustration. A relentlessly logical man—an engineer by training—Carter "was beginning to see that human problems have their own irrational logic, which might be more responsive to the touch of a magician or a psychiatrist than an engineer."

As the days passed, the stakes rose even higher. Carter was being excoriated for taking so much time away from other business, and both Begin and Sadat needed to return home. The political price all of them would pay for failing to reach an agreement was incalculable. On the 11th day, an exasperated Carter instructed his advisers to draft the speech he would deliver to Congress detailing why the summit had failed.

Neither Sadat nor Begin comes off well in Wright's narrative, with both of them at various times petulant and threatening to leave. The sticking issue, aside from the specific language that Carter kept drafting and revising as he shuttled from one delegation to the other, was the Israeli presence in the Sinai. Begin refused to remove Israelis from the Sinai, a concession that Sadat considered nonnegotiable. Finally, Carter pressed the idea that Begin could take political cover by referring the matter to the Knesset.

Despite what should have been the decisive breakthrough, however, Begin continued to equivocate. His final evasion was a refusal to allow language about Jerusalem into the final agreement, even though the language reflected long-established American policy.

With an agreement once again just beyond his grasp, Carter played his final card. He knew that Begin adored his grandchildren, so when Carter signed photographs from the summit, he inscribed them to each of Begin's grandchildren by name. "I wanted to be able to say, 'This is when your grandfather and I brought peace to the Middle

East,’” Carter said. Tears welled in Begin’s eyes, and Carter secured his signature diplomatic triumph.

The remainder of the story is not so edifying. Wright strongly suggests that Begin reneged on a verbal promise not to expand settlements on the West Bank, an issue that festers to this day. Carter was denied a second term, in part because Begin campaigned against him. Sadat was assassinated by Islamic extremists. Carter has often noted, with more than a touch of bitterness, that none of his successors as president has followed up on the hard-won Camp David Accords.

For Carter and Sadat, the price of peace at Camp David was steep. As Carter remarked at the time, and as illustrated by current events, the price of failure ever since has been fearsome.