At the end of the summer of 1978, almost a year after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's historic trip to Israel, negotiations between the two countries had stalled. In March, after Palestinian terrorists killed 38 Israelis, the Israelis invaded Lebanon, inflaming the Arab world. And Prime Minister Menachem Begin made clear that he was unwilling to stop Israeli settlements in "occupied territory," withdraw from the Sinai or the West Bank or grant Palestinians any real authority.

Despite these developments — and advice that he not invest political capital in an initiative that was doomed before it started — President Jimmy Carter invited Sadat and Begin to come to Camp David.

"Close to nature, peaceful and isolated from the world," the two leaders, he wrote, with a characteristic combination of idealism, hubris and naïveté, might conclude the "First Egyptian-Jewish peace since the time of Jeremiah."

In “Thirteen Days in September,” Lawrence Wright, a staff writer for the New Yorker, and the author of six previous nonfiction books, provides a splendid and suspenseful account of the Camp David negotiations.

Drawing on the personal diaries of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, interviews and archives in Jerusalem, Cairo and Washington, D.C., he attributes the agreement to the character, temperament, ideology and tactical and strategic calculations of Sadat and Begin, the isolation of the participants and the dogged determination of Carter.

As the days passed, it became clear that neither Begin nor Sadat could leave without paying a terrible political price. Isolation became a stronger incentive, Wright adds, because the two men couldn’t stand each other, or the idea of remaining in Camp David.

Wright’s biographical sketches of his subjects, each of whom saw himself as a “living exemplar of prophetic tradition,” are fascinating. In the 1930s and ’40s, he reveals, Sadat’s hatred of the British led him to write to Hitler, whom he admired “from the bottom of my heart.” Although Begin never fired a gun, he had blood on his hands as the leader of Irgun, which blew up the King David Hotel in 1946.
Most important were the contrasting styles of Sadat and Begin. While Sadat was emotional, a dreamer and an idealist, Begin was colder and more analytical, grinding down proposals inch by inch “into the fine dry powder of details, legal clauses, and quotes from international law.”

Despite mistrust, mistakes and miscalculations, they signed a peace treaty that has endured. Nonetheless, Wright concludes, although Egypt got back Sinai, Camp David did nothing to deter Israel from building settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, convincing Palestinians that they had been betrayed, feeding Islamic fundamentalism — and meaning that the comprehensive peace Carter had hoped to broker was not in sight.

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