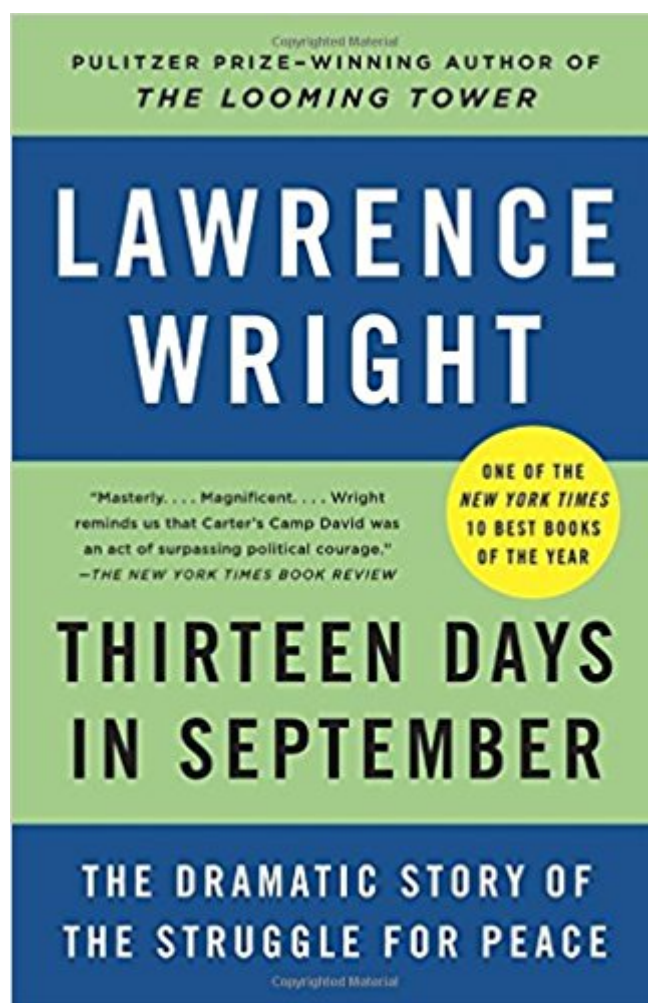


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# Thirteen Days In September: The Dramatic Story Of The Struggle For Peace



## Synopsis

ONE OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW'S 10 BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR One of the Best Books of the Year: The Washington Post, The Christian Science Monitor, NPR, Entertainment Weekly, The Economist, The Daily Beast, St. Louis Post-Dispatch In September 1978, three world leaders—Menachem Begin of Israel, Anwar Sadat of Egypt, and U.S. president Jimmy Carter—met at Camp David to broker a peace agreement between the two Middle East nations. During the thirteen-day conference, Begin and Sadat got into screaming matches and had to be physically separated; both attempted to walk away multiple times. Yet, by the end, a treaty had been forged—one that has quietly stood for more than three decades, proving that peace in the Middle East is possible. Wright combines politics, scripture, and the participants' personal histories into a compelling narrative of the fragile peace process. Begin was an Orthodox Jew whose parents had perished in the Holocaust; Sadat was a pious Muslim inspired since boyhood by stories of martyrdom; Carter, who knew the Bible by heart, was driven by his faith to pursue a treaty, even as his advisers warned him of the political cost. Wright reveals an extraordinary moment of lifelong enemies working together—and the profound difficulties inherent in the process. *Thirteen Days in September* is a timely revisiting of this diplomatic triumph and an inside look at how peace is made.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

œMasterly. . . . Magnificent. . . . Wright reminds us that Carter's Camp David was an act of

surpassing political courage. • • "The New York Times Book Review" "An illuminating view of a vital event. . . . Both riveting and revealing. • • "The Boston Globe" "Mr. Wright displays a sensitive understanding of the region and a fine pen as he sketches in the characters and motivations of the three main players. • • "The Economist" "Spellbinding. . . . A cliffhanger. . . . A page-turner. • • "Chicago Tribune" "Fascinating personal and historic detail. • • "The Christian Science Monitor" "Brilliant penetrating scholarship.... Elucidates the issues that continue to plague the Middle East.... Wright expertly captures every move of the three-way realpolitik chess match. • • "Entertainment Weekly" "Exceedingly balanced, highly readable, and appropriately sober. • • "Los Angeles Times" "A splendid and suspenseful account of the negotiations that led to the Camp David accord. • • "Minneapolis Star Tribune" "A chronicle of diplomatic success. . . . The heart of the book is the daily, sometimes hourly shifts in tactics and postures, stands and counterstands, that unfolded over 13 days in 1978. • • "The Plain Dealer" "A unique moment in history superbly captured. . . . A day-by-day account of the tense negotiations that shaped these historic talks. . . . Yet another triumph for Wright. • • "Kirkus Reviews (starred)" "Meticulously researched. . . . Almost nail-bitingly tense. . . . An authoritative, fascinating, and relatively unbiased exploration of a pivotal period and a complicated subject. • • "Publishers Weekly (starred)"

Lawrence Wright is a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and the author of six previous books of nonfiction, including *In the New World*, *Remembering Satan*, *The Looming Tower*, *Going Clear*, and one novel, *God's Favorite*. His books have received many prizes and honors, including a Pulitzer Prize for *The Looming Tower*. He is also a playwright and screenwriter. He and his wife are longtime residents of Austin, Texas. [www.lawrencewright.com](http://www.lawrencewright.com)

Camp David has become a shorthand for the summit that President Jimmy Carter convened in September 1978 between President Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel. Likewise, achieving a Camp David agreement has become synonymous with overcoming initial differences and reconciling opposing viewpoints through the sheer force of mediation and negotiation. *Thirteen Days in September* explains why this expression became reality. I am reviewing Lawrence Wright's book as part of a series on diplomatic negotiations, looking for clues on how to organize international conferences (see my previous entries [here](#) and [here](#)). This book doesn't deal with the form of the Camp David summit but with its substance: it is a kind of a *Getting to Yes* book, a *How to Deal With Difficult People* compendium, or a rewrite of Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. This being say, *Thirteen Days in*

September does not take the form of a case manual or a diplomatic textbook. It doesn't draw general lessons, and doesn't refer to other, Camp David-like experiences. A how to book or a self-help manual it certainly isn't. In fact, such a how-to book on negotiations already exists, and it was directly inspired by the Camp David episode. In the run-up to the summit, Cyrus Vance, himself a trained negotiator, asked his Harvard colleague Roger Fisher if he had any suggestion on how to handle the meeting's dynamics. Fisher produced his last book, titled *International Mediation: A Working Guide for the Practitioner*, which he later transformed into a bestseller on negotiation techniques, *Getting to YES*, co-authored with William Ury. Members of the Harvard Negotiation Project, Fisher and Ury focused on the psychology of negotiation in their method, "principled negotiation," finding acceptable solutions by determining which needs are fixed and which are flexible for negotiators. Giving such advice as "separate the people from the problem", "focus on interests, not positions", "invent options for mutual gain" and "know your BATNA (Best Alternative To Negotiated Agreement)", they insisted on trade-offs and mutual gains, on bargaining and win-win solutions. Negotiation theory assumes rational actors advancing their country's national interest in an orderly fashion. But there was nothing rational about the actors at Camp David. They were full-blooded individuals, moved by passions and hatred, deeply held beliefs and sympathy. There even was a touch of insanity hanging in the air. Begin has had frequent bouts of depression and was constantly oscillating between exhilaration and despair. Sadat was unpredictable and was capable of strokes of genius as well as unmovable stubbornness. Even Carter, the cold-blooded engineer who liked to divide every problem into solvable parts, sometimes lost his temper and yelled at his guests in exasperated fashion. But perhaps the most deranged individual was the Egyptian delegate Hassan el-Tohamy, a former intelligence agent who also functioned as Sadat's astrologer, court jester, and spiritual guru. According to Sadat, this Sufi mystic "had something godly in him and he could see the unknown." He would stand up at a dinner party and greet the Prophet Muhammad as if his ghost were physically present in the room. He constantly reported prophetic dreams or conversations he just had with angels. "We all thought he was mad," Boutros-Ghali recalled. Worse, he would make erroneous reports to the leader, pretending an agreement to withdraw from occupied territories was at hand when in fact there was none. "It is entirely possible that the Middle East peace process was set in motion by the misunderstanding of a madman," writes the author. Not only were there madmen in attendance: there were also terrorists at the table. As the saying goes, one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, or a future head of state for that matter. As the author

records, both Sadat and Begin had committed terrorist acts against the British in their struggle for national independence. In the words of Wright, "they both had blood on their hands" although it is not clear whether they themselves carried arms and planted bombs as opposed to masterminding attacks and terror acts. They had also spent long stretches in prison and in clandestinity, and were deeply schooled in the art of conspiracy. Begin, in particular, is portrayed as a political outcast who would have remained in the fringe of Israeli politics had he not been put center stage by the 1973 war launched by Sadat. "Many Israelis considered him a crank, a fascist, or just an embarrassing reminder of the terrorist underground that stained the legend of the country's glorious struggle for independence." Even Wright opines that the transformation of terrorism as a primarily local phenomenon into a global one came about in large part because of the success of [Begin's] tactics. He proved that, under the right circumstances, terror works. Many years later, American forces would find a copy of Begin's memoir "The Revolt" in the library of an al-Qaeda training camp. Osama bin Laden read Begin in an attempt to understand how a terrorist transformed himself into a statesman. The author frames the stakes raised by the threesome meeting in religious terms. Witness the opening sentence of the book: "Three men, representing three religions, met for thirteen days at the presidential retreat of Camp David in order to solve a dispute that religion itself had largely caused." And Wright adds: "The struggle for peace at Camp David is a testament to the enduring force of religion in modern life, as seen in its ability to mold history and in the difficulty of shedding the mythologies that continue to lure societies into conflict." But contrary to what Wright writes, these three men did not represent their religion in any way; nor did religion cause the Middle East quagmire politics did. This being said, it is true that religion added a complex dimension to the negotiation at Camp David. Jimmy Carter, the Southern Baptist preacher, taught Sunday school every weekend from the age of eighteen on. As Wright reminds us, "he had studied the Bible when he was a child, and the geography of ancient Palestine was more familiar to him than that of most of the United States." His decision to convene the summit despite the warning of his advisers and against his own political interest was religious in essence: "he had come to believe that God wanted him to bring peace to the Middle East." In the book, he is often caught praying, while Sadat, also a deeply religious person, is portrayed as enjoying his nightcap of whisky. As Kissinger once remarked, "great men are so rare that they take some time getting used to." The great foreign policy expert certainly took some time getting to Sadat: his first impression of the Egyptian president had been of "a buffoon, an operatic figure." But after the Yom Kippur war Kissinger came to recognize Nasser's

instinctive genius for the bold stroke that could change history. Sadat had stunned Egypt by disposing of Nasser's corrupt cronies and sending them to jail; then by expelling Soviet military advisers and reversing alliance to shift toward the US. He had then stunned the world by launching the Yom Kippur war in October 1973, the first time Arab armies were capable of inflicting serious losses to the Israelis on the battlefield; then by agreeing on a ceasefire while the Great Powers were on the brink of armed confrontation. His most stunning stroke of genius was his surprise visit to Israel and his speech at the Knesset. In political linguo, the unexpected visit of a statesman that turns the tables towards peaceful coexistence is called a "Nixon in China" moment. In all rigor, one should coin the adage that it takes a Sadat to talk to the Knesset. His speech was a mastery of rightful eloquence and uncompromising prose. Witness the opening: "Let me tell you without the slightest hesitation that I have not come to you under this dome to make a request that your troops evacuate the occupied territories. Complete withdrawal from the Arab territories occupied after 1967 is a logical and undisputed necessity. Nobody should plead for that." Nasser's insistence on "complete withdrawal from these territories, including Arab Jerusalem," stands in stark contrast to Begin's uncompromising stance on the issue: "the West Bank, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and Sinai are all ours," was how his basic position could be summed up. During the discussions, he refused to even utter the name "Palestinians" for the reason that "Jews are also Palestinians." He persisted in calling the West Bank by its biblical names, Judea and Samaria, appealing to Carter's knowledge of the Scriptures to underline the claim that "God had given the land to its Chosen People." He turned to rhetoric to point out that the formula "legitimate rights" is a pleonasm: either a right is legitimate, or it is not a right. At the end point, the summit came down to a single issue: the evacuation of the Sinai settlements, where Begin had vowed to spend his retirement. All his arguments were justified by the goal of maintaining the security of Israel: "Sinai had been a historic concourse for attacking armies; the Golan Heights had been the dominating redoubt for Syrian artillery; the West Bank was a hideout for terrorists. Why surrender any of it?" Ignored in this reasoning, of course, were "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people," a formula Begin wouldn't even begin to hear. I mentioned by way of introduction that Camp David has become a generic expression. But the Camp David peace talks were a very specific event, one that doesn't lend itself to generalizations or applicable lessons. The main figures didn't play by the rule or apply a textbook approach to negotiation. They each came to the negotiating table with their own idiosyncrasies and personal histories. Carter thought he was on a mission from

God and that, once they saw each other's souls, his two guests would agree on a workable solution, with himself cast in the role of the facilitator. That illusion shattered within minutes of the first meeting of the three men. So Carter had to change his role to that of the coercer, someone who was willing to go beyond pleading and persuading to the point of issuing credible threats. The main threat, which was used repeatedly by the three men, was to leave Camp David and let the negotiation end inconclusively. But each character knew this would entail an enormous price, on a personal basis and at the level of their nation as well. Camp David also shows that, in the words of Boutros-Ghali, negotiating was more than sitting around a table: "it was also a dialogue away from the table." The most meaningful exchange occurred on Day Six during a visit to the nearby Gettysburg National Military Park. Here the words of Abraham Lincoln echoed in each leader's mind, and reminded them of the enormous price wars extracted from nations. Lawrence Wright, the author of *Thirteen Days in September*, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who specializes in international relations and Middle East issues. He doesn't express his opinions directly in the book, and never uses the word "Israel". Some readers will try to guess his politics however, and may find him heavily biased against Menachem Begin. This negative bias may be due to the sources that he collected: memoirs, personal diaries, recollections, and interviews with key officials from the Carter administration as well as from Israel and "less so" from Egypt. Begin had few friends, even in his own camp, and his career after Camp David went downhill. Carter portrays him negatively in his diaries and in his memoirs. But in my opinion, if Wright has a bias, it may be due to his profession as a journalist and in his cultural background as an American. He adopts a can-do attitude attuned to Carter's engineer mindset; he downplays the tragic dimension of life and the role of fate in conducting our destinies; despite his multiculturalist efforts, his misunderstanding of Islam stands in stark contrast to his familiarity with the Judeo-Christian tradition; his taste for portraits and psychological analysis draws its tropes from US government's use of profiling that was exposed to the public during the WikiLeaks scandal; and his narrative mixing three strands of time seems straight out of an American novel. In other words, this is a piece of American journalism: other chroniclers steeped in a different professional or cultural tradition may have provided a very different narrative.

Being a fan of Lawrence Wright's takes on multiple religions from Scientology in *Going Clear* to Al Qaeda in *Looming Tower* when this came out it was a must buy for me. I wasn't sure if I would enjoy it as much as some of his other books but was more than pleasantly surprised. It is his best book to date. It is a page turner. He describes the various personalities involved: not just those directly

involved in the talks but members of both entourages that attend. We read about how Carter chooses Camp David so those involved in the talks will dress down and take advantage of all the amenities at the wilderness location, some more than others. There are multiple instances of members of each government 'sneaking' into the another member of the opponents group. One discussion while on bicycles describes this in a brilliant example. We learn about mistakes from nearly if not by every member including the United States President Jimmy Carter. Only a researcher of Wright's caliber would be able to pull out these examples by interviewing almost every single person alive who was involved in the Egypt-Israeli Peace Accords.

What do heads of state and their top advisors really say to one another behind closed doors in high-stakes peacemaking? What do you do when 70% of the obstacles to peace are psychological? I wonder about some of the purported conversation but Lawrence Wright has certainly done his homework. One learns a great deal from this book. Unlike other reviewers, I would say this book is quite objective. If anything, it is not biased but simply incomplete in some respects. Carter was not the first American to forge a type of peace between Israel and its neighbors. In 1949, American Ralph Bunche, serving as a mediator for the UN, forged an armistice between Israel and Egypt over 6 weeks while on the Greek island of Rhodes. Bunche was appointed mediator after the first mediator Count Bernadotte was assassinated at point blank range by the Stern Gang. Neither Bunche nor Bernadotte are mentioned and they really should be. Although there was no jubilation on Day 13 of Camp David, the fact is that 36 years later, peace between Israel and Egypt still stands. Credit goes to many parties, including advisers to Begin. There is really something to be said for meeting 13 days straight and practically wearing one another down. I thought this was an outstanding day-to-day recounting of that ordeal.

A very good accounting of the events and personalities of the Carter administration's Camp David summit in 1978. Touching on the history and politics of the topic, it is also a compelling study of the character of Carter, Begin and Sadat. Well-documented and well-presented, my only real quibble with the flow of the book was the breakaway sections needed to flesh out the histories of the region and personalities discussed. In my opinion, this decision weakened the central narrative, dispensing background only as it became relevant. While making it perhaps an easier read, it did fracture the flow.

This book is a comprehensive fast paced description of the Camp David peace summit but is so



much more than that. After reading this book I not only had a deep understanding of these three leaders (and new views on Sadat and Begin from what my prior impressions were) but also a new understanding of the history of the creation of Israel. The juxtaposition of the talks with historical commentary was very effective. This guy is a consummate researcher and writer. Some may feel the book is somewhat biased but read for yourself and see. This is a fascinating story of international diplomacy. Highly recommended.

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