

Carter's Risky Summit

His standing in the public-opinion polls is at a low ebb, and on Capitol Hill even some members of his own party hold him faintly in contempt. But Jimmy Carter has never lost faith in his own powers of persuasion. Last week, the President arranged to put those powers to their sternest test yet. Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat agreed to sit down with Carter at his Camp David retreat right after Labor Day for an open-ended summit aimed at salvaging the Egyptian-Israeli peace negotiations. At least at the start of the talks, the three men will be alone, and Carter apparently believes that, given the opportunity, he and the other two God-fearing leaders can find a way out of the Middle East stalemate. "However they may posture in public," he said recently of Begin and Sadat, "when you talk to them privately, I don't think they are very far apart at all."

That optimistic view was hard to square with the hard-line public positions taken by Egypt and Israel. In any case, no one—certainly not Jimmy Carter—was predicting that the Camp David summit would produce a Middle East peace agreement. At best, the talks could result in a declaration of principles to guide future negotiations. At worst, they could be a dispiriting failure. "There is an obvious element of risk," Carter's national-security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, said after the White House made its surprise summit announcement.

A 'THANKLESS' CHORE

Carter's gamble was doubly risky. If Camp David seals the deadlock rather than breaking it, Sadat may well conclude that the peace initiative he launched so dramatically last November has run its course, forcing him to turn tough and prepare for war—or face the threat of being overthrown. In the U.S., failure of the summit would mean that Carter, once again, would get a political A for effort and a D for performance.

Seasoned negotiators fear hastily called summits without agendas, much preferring that basic agreements already be in place before heads of state put their own prestige on the line. But President Carter concluded late last month that the situation in the Middle East could deteriorate into war if the peace process weren't somehow jolted back into movement. He first raised the summit idea

over breakfast at a regular Friday foreign-policy meeting with Brzezinski, Vice President Walter Mondale, Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Defense Secretary Harold Brown and top staffer Hamilton Jordan. Ten days later, after Sadat had backed out of a planned meeting with Israel, the same group debated strategy for four hours across a large blond-wood table in the conference room of Laurel Lodge at Camp David. A consensus was reached to call for the summit.

In the past, Carter has referred to his attempts to mediate between Sadat and Begin as a "thankless" chore. But there seemed to be no other way to break the stalemate. "Anybody could see that the thing was beginning to go to hell in a handbasket,"



Vance with Begin: *My answer is yes*

William Karel—Sygma



Across the table in Alexandria: Sadat accepted with surprising speed

Rachad el Koussy

one senior adviser said. "The two principals were in no position to get out of their respective boxes without some help from somebody."

Vance left for the Mideast with personal notes from Carter for Begin and Sadat. Both ran five handwritten pages on the President's pale-green stationery, and both contained the invitation to Camp David midway through the text. The one addressed to Begin pleaded for secrecy until the invitation had been tendered to Sadat. Indeed, Carter was so determined to prevent leaks that most top U.S. offi-

cial, including the ambassadors to both Egypt and Israel, were not informed of the plan in advance. In Jerusalem, Vance briefed Alfred Atherton, his special envoy to the Middle East, at the U.S. consulate, rather than in his suite at the King David Hotel. "The rooms had been swept [for bugs]" one aide said, "but we just didn't trust the hotel."

Vance handed Begin his letter during a brief private meeting. Showing no surprise or hesitation, the Prime Minister nodded as soon as he finished reading the letter. "My answer is 'Yes,'" he said.

The two men then joined Israeli Cabinet members for discussion of Mideast peace issues. "The hours of talk that followed were mere camouflage," an Israeli official said later. Begin continued the deception at a news conference. Asked whether a summit had been proposed, he replied with a straight face: "No such idea came up, and anyway the matter is hypothetical."

Two nights later, Vance and Sadat sank into the permanently damp, upholstered lawn chairs at Sadat's seaside villa in Alexandria, their aides out of earshot. This time, Vance read Carter's letter aloud (Sadat prefers to take in new ideas with his ears, rather than his eyes). Sadat thought for a few moments and said, "I accept." To preserve secrecy, both acceptances were cabled back to Washington in cryptic messages that spoke only of a "positive reply." When word of Sadat's decision reached the White House, Carter was playing host to executives of The New York Times and ABC in the family dining quarters. The President excused himself to take a call from Brzezinski, Jordan and press secretary Jody Powell. His response to the news was restrained. "That's good," he said softly—and returned to dinner without giving a hint of the announcement that was being prepared for the next morning.

'A FULL PARTNER'

Later, U.S. officials said Vance had been astonished by the speed with which Sadat accepted Carter's invitation. But the summit proposal was a welcome way out of the corner into which Sadat had painted himself eight days before, when he said he would not negotiate with Israel unless it pledged a complete withdrawal from occupied Arab territory in advance. At a news conference last week, Sadat explained his change of heart by announcing that the U.S. had agreed to be a "full partner" in the negotiations; his aides interpreted that to mean that Washington would put pressure on Israel.

"Egypt is a full partner, and we have a peace plan," said Minister of State Butros Ghali. "Israel is a full partner, and they have a peace plan. Now the U.S. is a full partner too." Administration officials insisted that there was no "U.S. peace plan" and that the partnership idea was merely a useful semantic device to save Sadat's face. "We've been a full partner all along," said a top U.S. policymaker.

On the substance of the Middle East dispute, virtually nothing has changed in recent weeks. The biggest sore spot re-

mains the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israel still is not ready to declare its willingness to withdraw from the territories, as Egypt demands. And although it has offered to "discuss" the issue of sovereignty after five years of interim home rule, it has not yet promised to "resolve" the issue. Israel still opposes a Palestinian state, insists that its own soldiers will have to remain on Arab soil and maintains that Jews must be allowed to settle freely on the West Bank.

Officials suggest that at Camp David the U.S. might be willing to propose a "territorial compromise," a partial Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank. Israel has said it would consider such a compromise if the Arabs proposed it. Egypt



With Carter: The President's reputation was on the line

cannot do so; it is committed to the full recovery of Arab land. But Sadat might accept the idea if it comes from Carter.

The Camp David meeting could run into trouble at any point. New fighting in trouble-prone Lebanon might drag in Israel and Syria, sabotaging the summit before it begins. And even in Egypt some skeptics think that Israeli stubbornness will send Sadat away empty-handed. "Do I think there will be a break-through?" a former high-ranking Egyptian official asked last week. "I say, *el mish mish* [fat chance]. The talks will fail because the Israelis are not going to give in. What will Sadat do then? Last week he vowed he would never sit down with Begin. His credibility in the Arab world is below zero. The man is stripped naked."

Predictably, hard-line Arab nations like Syria and Iraq denounced the Camp David summit, but their statements were less vehement than might have been expected. Saudi Arabia, the leader of the conservative Arab camp, was surprisingly bullish about next month's meeting. At an audience with Atherton, Saudi Crown Prince Fahd praised the summit as a "courageous" act and a "giant step" toward peace.

PERSONAL DIPLOMACY

Whether it would work out that way remained to be seen. "The fact is, we don't know what's going to happen," admitted a senior U.S. official. "The primary fact is that the President issued the invitation, and the President has been willing to put his neck out on the line." Above all, the meeting would be an exercise in personal diplomacy, an almost evangelical attempt by Carter to get Sadat and Begin to agree on at least the general principles of peace. He can be expected to urge Sadat to forgo the grand, unexpected gesture and show more patience for the nuts-and-bolts of negotiation; at the same time, he must try to persuade Begin to rise above legalistic haggling and grasp a broader vision of peace.

At secluded Camp David, the summit would be something like a religious retreat. "It's an ideal place," said a top adviser, "because we can sit down and talk in a way that you can't do in the glare of publicity. It's a quiet atmosphere; you can take walks after dinner." And a White House staffer suggested that if Carter "can sit both of them down on a sofa and talk without Barbara Walters collaring them fifteen minutes later, there might be a chance for some progress."

Carter himself was awaiting the challenge soberly. He convened his senior staff last week and tersely ordered them not to build up too many expectations for the impending summit. "We don't want a circus," one aide quoted him as saying. "It's too serious." Despite the gamble he was taking and the limited outlook for progress, Carter felt he had no other option. "The risk is great in doing something," he told Congressional leaders last week, "but it's [riskier] to do nothing." As Carter saw it, a failure to start new peace talks could well lead to another Middle East war that no one wants and no one would win.

—DAVID BUTLER with LARS-ERIK NELSON in Vance's party, THOMAS M. DeFRANK in Washington, WILLIAM E. SCHMIDT in Cairo and MILAN J. KUBIC in Jerusalem