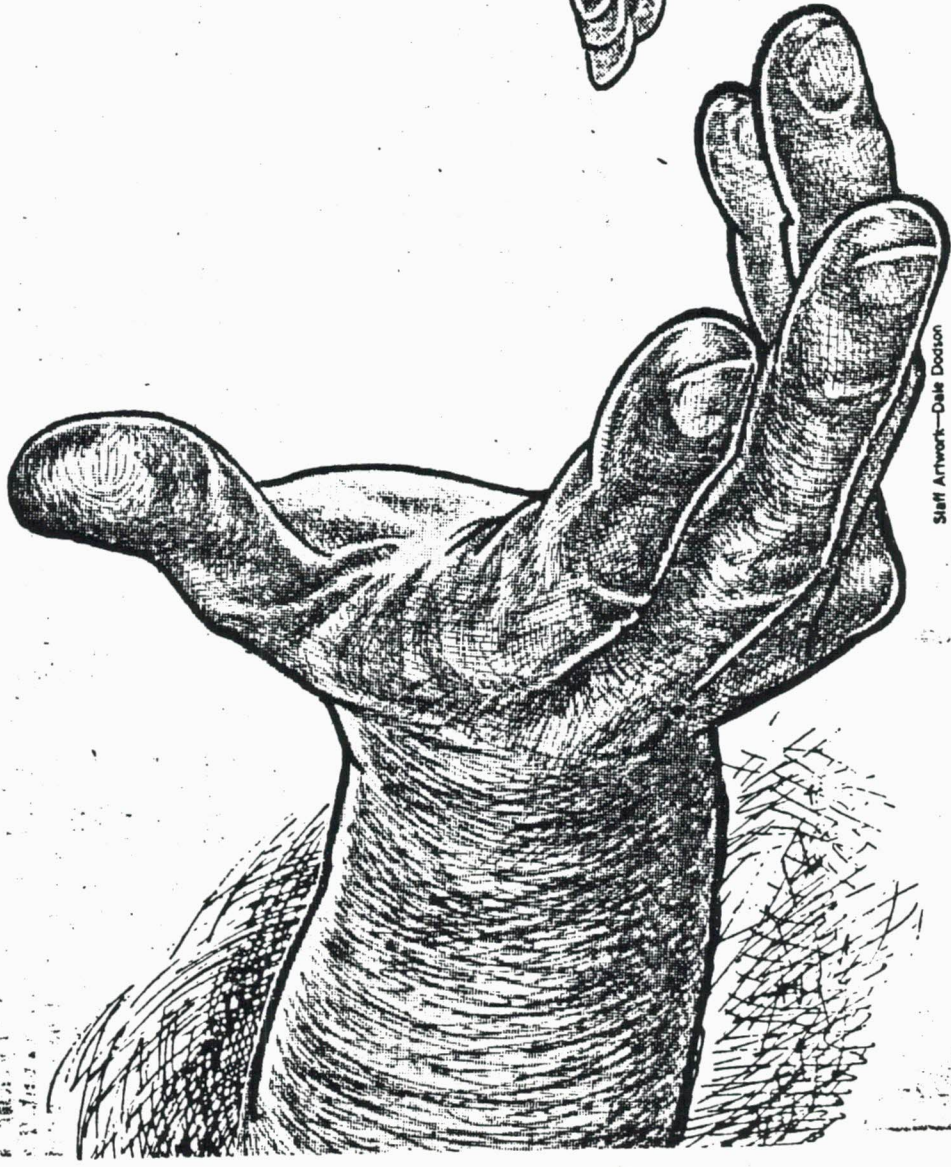


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# Perspective

## Dove in the Hand: Sadat-Begin Pact



Staff Artwork—Dale Dodson

# Carter Risks Much to Gain Fragile Treaty

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By MARK A. BRUZONSKY

The real test of diplomacy is historical: What things look like looking back, not the euphoria of the moment.

Whatever the outcome of President Carter's exhaustive efforts to couple Egypt and Israel in a fragile treaty, the president has undeniably returned to a variant of the "step-by-step" diplomacy he condemned throughout most of his first year.

Carter even used that heretofore banished phrase in his address to Egypt's Peoples Assembly last week. "It's obviously a bilateral peace. It's useless to pretend it's comprehensive," uttered one frustrated top-level Egyptian diplomat before Sadat's hesitant OK.

But unless Carter can keep the Egyptian-Israeli deal intact *plus* make significant progress on the gut issues of the conflict (which have only been tabled), today's triumph could be tomorrow's disaster.

As one high-ranking American government official reflected while Carter groped his way through negotiating sessions in Israel: "Carter's risking everything in a wild gamble . . . Even if he achieves the kind of Egyptian-Israeli deal that's being discussed . . . if much more isn't done, and within a year a real process of West Bank autonomy begun, then whatever the agreements say, whatever the wording, they will unravel and go into the dust bin of history."

When questioned about the president's chances, this official added: "So far the Israelis have given nothing real on the Palestinian issue" and "the odds that they will (after a separate Egypt-Israel agreement) are very, very small."

With such herculean tasks still ahead, Carter has committed the United States to spend exorbitant energies and considerable money just maintaining an unstable arrangement which is but "an admission ticket to the more complex issue," to quote CBS commentator Bernard Kalb.

In a sense, insufficiently analyzed in the press, Carter's separate peace gamble results not from an objective determination of American national interests in the region, but from a pragmatic appraisal that all other avenues — including many that are preferable — are blocked either by the intransigence of the parties or for domestic political reasons at home. To invest so much American credibility and finance in so shaky an arrangement is highly questionable.

Criticism coming from America's moderate Arab allies has much to do with Carter's reluctant but near-total shift from the

## Treaty

From Page 1-C

multilateral, comprehensive, Soviet-accepted approach to the Arab-Israeli quagmire to an elaborate Sinai III deal heavily invested with pomp by Gerald Rafshoon, tottering on presidential "trust" and paid for by American billions.

Two major warning signs are immediately visible as this Camp David "progress" unfolds:

• First, the Carter administration has given contradictory expressions of intent regarding the crucial Palestinian issue to top leaders in the American Jewish community and to important Arab diplomats.

To Jewish leaders, there have been assurances at very high levels that Israel will not be pressed to go beyond the kind of "autonomy" Begin has outlined during the past few months — essentially a re-crafted form of military occupation with Israel retaining land, immigration control and water rights. Yet, Arab diplomats have been urged to join the "process" with equally firm assurances that the administration is fully aware the Egyptian-Israeli accord can only survive if a true autonomy allowing for the possibility of Palestinian statehood is acquiesced in by the Israelis.

Whether Carter is being double-faced or whether these contradictory assurances reflect a basic split within the administration itself is subject to debate. But that one group or the other is going to loudly cry foul some months down the road is certain.

• The second warning sign is inherent in the very attachment Carter has developed to the Camp David "process." In the words of another administration official deeply involved in Middle East diplomacy:

"The situation the United States faces," this official noted just before Carter's triumphant return, "recalls our Vietnam policy. We were so committed that the argument was always made that we couldn't pull out because our prestige was on the line. We had to go forward because we had begun and gotten so deeply involved."

"That's what I hear all the time now, about our Middle East policy," the official confided. "We're too committed to the Camp David agreement to rethink our policy, just as we were in Vietnam. Until disaster strikes, that is."

So maybe, just maybe, Carter has made a breakthrough as most everyone is saying. But unless he resolutely takes that admission ticket and lists the more complex issues on his immediate agenda it may not be a breakthrough to peace. For Carter has chosen to build so fragile a beginning that even moderate buffeting by political winds in the stormy Middle East may undo it all. And if this were to happen, psychologically and politically the foundation for a new beginning might not exist for some time.