



Remembering Sam Lewis

Dan Shapiro, U.S. Ambassador to Israel

Written statement submitted to the Samuel W. Lewis Memorial Symposium
Washington Institute for Near East Policy
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On September 29, The Washington Institute held a special symposium honoring the life and legacy of the late Ambassador Samuel W. Lewis. Below is a written statement submitted by Ambassador Dan Shapiro, which was read to symposium participants by Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, the keynote speaker.

I deeply regret being unable to join you in person, as I had planned. My duties require me today to be in New York, attending Prime Minister Netanyahu's address to the UN General Assembly. I believe Sam, who was ever faithful in carrying out his official duties, would have understood, but I nevertheless beg your forgiveness.

While I don't have the privilege of hearing Eli Rubinstein's learned presentation or Ambassador Bill Brown's remarks, so I cannot respond to them, permit me to share a brief story about Sam and an observation about his amazing tenure.

When I was preparing to take up my duties as U.S. ambassador to Israel, I made the rounds of many of my predecessors, illustrious names that you all know, seeking advice and the wisdom of their experience. I had treasured Sam's friendship and mentorship for many years, and, like others, he was generous with his time and insights. As our visit neared its end, I told Sam what an inspiration he was to me and many others, and that if I could be half as good an ambassador as he was, I would consider myself a great success.

With an impish grin, he asked me, "Do you want to know the secret to being considered a great ambassador?" Did I? I was on the edge of my seat, about to have the master share the magic formula. "Absolutely," I replied. "The secret," he said, "is to be there when a breakthrough happens."

"Be there when a breakthrough happens."

That was typical Sam. Modest to a fault, he described his role almost as an accidental bystander as history was made. Well aware of the opportunity he had to witness and work toward historic achievements, he was nevertheless always ready to bestow the credit on others.

In particular, Sam was being generous to, and displaying his admiration for, leaders like Begin and Sadat, who took the extraordinarily brave and difficult decisions required to reach an achievement like the Camp David Accords. He appreciated that kind of leadership, and understood it was essential for success.

Sam dramatically understated his own contribution, of course. He played a major part in the breakthrough of Camp David and numerous other achievements in the U.S.-Israel relationship during his tenure.

But his remark revealed an important truth. No one government official is solely responsible for the initiatives, negotiations, breakthroughs, and, indeed, failures that occur during their tenure. There is a kind of orchestra quality to the efforts, with the players sometimes playing in concert, other times in discord. The result, particularly in the Middle East, depends on the ability of various actors, across multiple governments, to harmonize their efforts and to overcome those who seek to play a different tune. What a strong player like Sam brought to the orchestra were the qualities of careful listening, sympathy and understanding for Israel's dilemmas, expert analysis and reporting, tough-minded advocacy for American interests, and expert deployment of American leadership.

This last element—American leadership—he knew to be another critical ingredient to progress in the Middle East. He never stopped advocating for it, nor summoning his creativity, nor challenging others to summon theirs, whether as the head of Policy Planning, or in various later roles, to consider effective ways of deploying it.

With the trust of Israeli leaders like Menachem Begin, Moshe Dayan, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Shamir, and the full confidence of Presidents Carter and Reagan, and Secretaries of State Vance, Muskie, Haig, and Shultz, Sam helped guide the U.S.-Israel relationship through events as successful as the Israel-Egypt peace negotiations, as controversial as the Israeli strike on Osiraq, and as challenging as the First Lebanon War.

He understood something fundamentally important about the U.S.-Israel relationship that enabled him to help see it strengthened throughout all these ups and downs. And because he recognized the U.S. interest in Israel's strength, security, and survival as a Jewish and democratic state, he remained deeply involved in and committed to promoting peace efforts between Israel and its neighbors long after he left his post as ambassador, long after his government service, and until the end of his amazingly productive life.

To this day, wherever I go in Israel, Sam Lewis's name stands out as the most recognized and honored of all U.S. ambassadors. Israelis trusted him, respected him, even loved him, all while knowing not to question his vigorous representation of America's interests.

These qualities enabled him to make Israelis feel and internalize the support they enjoy from their alliance with the United States, particularly in the face of their genuine security threats, and simultaneously made it possible for him to challenge Israelis on their assumptions and encourage them to make the hard decisions that their peace and security require. Among Sam's many other legacies, that combination of expressing friendship while speaking with authority, building trust to enable the tough conversations, is one that I deeply respect, and which I believe has contributed the most to the strengthening of the U.S.-Israel relationship and the advancement of our common interests.

With every good wish for a successful symposium in Sam's honor,

Dan Shapiro

U.S. Ambassador to Israel