Change Agent

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Articles & Testimony

After suffering a stroke yesterday, Ariel Sharon is fighting for his life in a Jerusalem hospital. Even if he survives, he is unlikely to lead Israel again. But while his tenure as prime minister is probably over, Sharon has already accomplished more than enough to earn a place among Israel's giants. His years as prime minister have produced three key achievements. On its own, each was important. Together, they produce a legacy.

Sharon came to office in February 2001 by trouncing the incumbent, Labor's Ehud Barak. Israel was engulfed in a wave of Palestinian terror following the collapse of the Camp David peace negotiations the previous summer. At the same time, conventional wisdom had it that Sharon had himself provoked the Palestinian outburst when, as opposition leader, he had visited the area of the Muslim shrines on the Temple Mount. In fact, as mountains of evidence now show, that uprising reflected the well-organized planning of Yasir Arafat.

Sharon's first great achievement was to defeat the uprising. He did this with new military strategies (retaking territory inside the Palestinian Authority, isolating Arafat, assassinating terrorists and their political leaders) but also with skillful diplomacy (reaching a meeting of the minds with the new American president, George W. Bush). This combination, of course, did not end terrorism, as continued bombings and rocket firings attest. But the cumulative impact of Israel's counterterrorist strategy raised the price of terrorism so high that many Palestinians began to yearn for the normalcy of life before the uprising. And Israel's relentless attacks against terrorist groups forced so many terrorist leaders to spend their waking hours moving from hideout to hideout that actual operations were left in chaos and disarray. It was a brutal war, one that took nearly 1,000 Israeli lives and 3,000 Palestinian lives. But the eventual election of a new Palestinian president who argued that violence hurts Palestinian interests proved that political progress was achievable through military means.

This success was followed by Sharon's implementation of the most important innovation in Israeli security strategy since 1967. Ever since Israel captured territories from Arab states in the Six Day War, it has been willing to trade land for peace. That original formula led to peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. Under Yitzhak Rabin, Israel also applied that formula to the Palestine Liberation Organization, a group that was not even a combatant in 1967; hence, the Oslo Accords. By the time Sharon came to power, after Arafat had rejected Barak's generous peace offer and launched the violent uprising, he was convinced that the strategy of bilateral peacemaking had run its course -- that Israel could no longer tie its fate to finding a responsible Arab partner. Israel, he concluded, would have to act on its own to determine its future.

So was born the policy of unilateralism. Under Sharon, this policy had two main planks. First was the construction of a still-unfinished security barrier that runs either along the route of the 1967 frontier (the Green Line) or several miles east of it, taking in less than 10 percent of West Bank territory. This barrier -- mostly fence, in some places wall -- has not hermetically sealed Israel from the scourge of Palestinian suicide bombers, but it has proven to be quite effective at preventing their infiltration. The second element of unilateralism was Sharon's decision to withdraw all Israeli civilians and soldiers from the Gaza Strip without negotiating with the Palestinians. (Gaza was already surrounded by a high fence to stop infiltration into Israel.)

For a man who invested so much in building Jewish settlements in the Greater Land of Israel, Sharon's decision to evict 9,000 Jews from Gaza -- a place he had declared to be an essential part of the state only a year earlier -- was a remarkable turnabout. Indeed, in defining the core elements of unilateralism, Sharon seemed to borrow heavily from the two Labor Party ex-generals he defeated to become prime minister. Barak, after all, had popularized the idea of "separation" -- his campaign slogan was "they will be there and we will be here" -- and Amram Mitzna, whom Sharon crushed in a 2004 election, had run on a platform of leaving Gaza.

To be sure, unilateralism is a risky and controversial policy. In the eyes of some Arabs, it reflects Israeli weakness, not strength. Moreover, the fact that Israel left Gaza without demanding any commitment to peace or security from the Palestinians is a precedent that could come to haunt Israel in the future. As a long-term approach, unilateralism could leave Israel as a fortress society, hiding behind ever-higher defensive walls; and, as history has shown, walls eventually come tumbling down. If unilateralism is the road to peace, it is a winding and potentially treacherous road.

But Sharon knew that Israelis wanted something different than what they had been fed by their leaders over the past three decades; they had, as the Hebrew saying goes, ayn breira, no choice but to take matters into their own hands, put up a barrier, and get out of Gaza. Understanding the deepest political currents in Israeli society led to Sharon's third great innovation: creating a political party that actually reflects the disillusioned centrism of the plurality of Israeli voters.

Whatever the strategic pitfalls of unilateralism, it appeals to moderate elements within both Israel's left and right. Voters on the left prefer to reach a negotiated peace, while voters on the right prefer reciprocity from Palestinians before making concessions. But in recent years Israelis of all political inclinations have begun to wonder whether they would be stuck forever waiting for a Palestinian leader with whom they could deal. (An example: The Palestinian legislative election later this month pits the terrorist organization Hamas against the Fatah list, which is headed by a man serving five life sentences for his role in the murder of Israelis. Evidently, a dozen years after Oslo, killing Israelis remains the prime source of bona fides for Palestinian political aspirants.)

After failing to win over his own Likud, the party he helped found a generation ago, Sharon unceremoniously dumped it late last year to form a new party, Kadima (which means "Forward" in Hebrew). Never before had a sitting Israeli prime minister quit his own party; it is virtually unheard of in democratic politics. But as politicians from both Labor and Likud joined Sharon, his move looked like a stroke of genius. And wonder of wonders, the most recent polls in advance of the March 2006 elections have Sharon's party capturing twice as many seats as Labor, now led by the former head of Israel's largest trade union, and more than three times as many as the rump Likud, led again by one-time prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

As doctors work to save Sharon from the debilitating repercussions of his second stroke, the ultimate question is which pieces of this remarkable legacy will survive him. My guess is that the shift in military thinking that enabled Israel to shrink the threat of terrorism is now an integral part of defense planning. Similarly, the shift from bilateralism to unilateralism is likely to last too, because it reflects both the deepest mood of the Israeli people and the sad realities of Palestinian politics. On this score, however, when -- if -- Palestinians get their internal house in order, the pendulum may swing back.

In the near term, the centrist party that Sharon created is the most fragile of his achievements. Without Sharon at the helm, Kadima's success is dependent on the egos of politicians; and the Israeli record of such experiments is not encouraging. But for a man who taught Israel to expect the unexpected -- in both war and peace -- bequeathing the country a unified, cohesive centrist movement would be a fitting last act.

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