

BOOKS

[*The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*, Dennis Ross, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 872 pages]

The Peace That Failed

By Michael C. Desch

FORMER AMERICAN MIDDLE EAST envoy Dennis Ross is a dedicated public servant deeply committed to achieving peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In his new book *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*, Ross works hard to be evenhanded in this account of why his efforts, spanning both Democratic and Republican administrations, failed to establish peace between Israel and two of its neighbors, Syria and Palestine.

At one level, Ross succeeds in producing an admirably comprehensive history of the process. But on a deeper level, Ross—now counselor to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a Fox News analyst—fails to provide a “fair and balanced” assessment of the history he recounts. While he is critical of the top leaders on both sides and freely admits that all parties—himself included—made mistakes, he lays the blame for the failure of the peace process at the feet of the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasir Arafat. As Ross puts it, “I would not now be writing about the failings of Oslo if it had not been for Yasir Arafat.”

This one-sided indictment raises important questions: is Ross’s interpretation of the ultimate failure of Camp David consistent with the historical record, including his own account of events? If not, what caused the disjunction between the known history and his analysis? In fact, Ross’s conclusion that

Arafat and the Palestinians are principally to blame does not follow from his narrative, much less from the rest of the literature on the peace process. Ross’s faulty assessment results from a set of biases shared among many Americans but exacerbated in Ross’s case by his personal and religious ties to Israel and by his all-too-human need to find someone to blame. Because the United States and Israel are *de facto* allies and Ross is so deeply committed to Israel, he cannot blame the Israelis or the Americans, even if the historical record would suggest that they bear an important share of the responsibility for the collapse of the peace process. Hence, Arafat and the Palestinians must take the rap.

As with so many bitter and long-running struggles to control the same piece of territory, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has produced very different stories about how it started and who is at fault for perpetuating it. Dennis Ross offers what is by now the standard American and Israeli story. In this account, the Jews who immigrated to Palestine prior to 1948 did so seeking refuge from oppression. They were willing to live in a bi-national state with the Arab inhabitants but this offer was spurned, and so the Zionists had to fight for their own independence. Since 1948, Israel has stood as the Middle East’s only democracy in a sea of hostile neighbors. With pluck and courage (and ever increasing

In Ross’s story, the Israel-Palestinian conflict followed much the same course. Arafat and the PLO were never interested in peace until after the 1991 Gulf War, when Arafat imprudently backed Saddam and isolated the Palestinians internationally. This isolation forced the Palestinians to get serious about peace and led to the historic Oslo Accords in 1993. Unfortunately, the Oslo process ground to a halt, in the Israeli and American interpretation, because of continuing Palestinian terrorism.

In addition to a general Palestinian unwillingness to rein in terror (presumably reflecting an unwillingness to live in peace next to the Jewish state), Ross attributes the failure of the July 2000 Camp David summit to Palestinian obstructionism. In his words: “The summit was about to collapse. The President had made his best effort, and now so had Barak. Arafat has said no to everything.” The final nail in the peace process’s coffin, in Ross’s view, was Arafat’s rejection of the December 2000 “Clinton parameters,” which would have given the Palestinians control of most of the West Bank, Gaza, and parts of Jerusalem. To paraphrase Abba Eban’s famous line: Arafat never misses a chance to miss an opportunity for peace. This account of the missing peace is widely accepted in Israel, and to the extent that Americans know and care about why the peace process failed, this is their understanding too.

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American support), the Israelis managed to survive. In spite of unremitting Arab hostility, the Israelis have repeatedly stretched out the hand of peace, only to have it slapped away. Only the Egyptians and the Jordanians eventually realized the futility of trying to destroy Israel and have been willing to make a peace, albeit one that remains chilly and fragile.

But this account is badly flawed. First and perhaps most important, it is not correct to say that Israel accepted the Clinton parameters while the Palestinians rejected them. The Israeli cabinet voted to accept Clinton’s ideas (which were not a final agreement but rather a set of guidelines within which a final settlement would be reached), but Prime Minister Ehud Barak then sent Clinton a

20-page letter outlining Israel's objections. Similarly, the Palestinian leadership also sent Clinton a detailed letter thanking him for his efforts and relating their own reservations. Both sides made clear that they wanted to continue to negotiate within that framework, but both also registered concerns. The claim that Israel accepted these terms while Arafat rejected them is a myth.

This leads to a second problem with Ross's version. The period he covers ends in December 2000 with the alleged Palestinian rejection of the Clinton proposal and Ross's departure from government in early January of the next year. But the story of the peace process does not end there. Most other analysts mark the peace effort's demise after the Israeli-Palestinian meeting at Taba, Egypt in January 2001. This makes a difference, since it was the Israelis who walked away from the progress made at Taba in anticipation of Ariel Sharon's defeat of Ehud Barak. The question of who deserves the most blame for the failure to achieve peace assumes a much different cast when we get what Paul Harvey calls "the rest of the story," which Ross fails to provide.

Few Americans realize that there is a more credible account out there that puts the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a different light. Ironically, this alternative

story is better known in parts of Israel and Palestine than it is here. Our understanding of the roots of Zionism and the origins of the Arab-Israeli conflict would profit greatly from a careful reading of Israel's "New Historians," such as Avi Shlaim and Benny Morris, who show clearly that the early Zionists were not interested in a bi-national state, were well aware that continued Jewish immigration would lead to conflict with the Arab inhabitants, and were willing to use very harsh methods to win that struggle.

Moreover, there are alternative accounts of the failure of the Oslo/Camp David process by other participants (Robert Malley and Hussein Agha) and independent analysts (Deborah Sontag, Charles Enderlin, and Jeremy Pressman) that lead to very different conclusions about what went wrong and who is to blame. Take the critical question of why Oslo did not set the stage for a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ross and other proponents of the official story emphasize Palestinian terrorism, but other analysts and participants underscore Israel's failure to meet its obligations and point out that the Palestinians had good reasons for being dissatisfied with the Oslo process. In the Palestinians' view, they had surrendered 78 percent of historic Palestine to Israel

when they recognized Israel as a sovereign state at Oslo in 1993; in return, they expected that they would get the remaining 22 percent (the West Bank and Gaza) as part of the final agreement. Yet the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands continued to deepen and expand after Oslo and the Israeli government began to interfere ever more intrusively in the lives of ordinary Palestinians. Ross mentions these facts only to dismiss them as a pretext for the Palestinian Authority's failure to fulfill its Oslo obligations to ensure Israeli security.

Indeed, on the eve of the 2000 Camp David talks, the Palestinians had legitimate grounds to be disillusioned with the Oslo process. Israel had spent much of the previous seven years pursuing peace with Jordan and Syria rather than working consistently with the Palestinians. While pushing Arafat to come to Camp David to reach a final settlement, Barak simultaneously backed away from Israel's obligations to undertake a third redeployment of Israeli forces in the Occupied Territories, transfer three Arab villages bordering Jerusalem to Palestinian control, and release a significant number of Palestinian prisoners. From the Palestinians' point of view, Barak's willingness to withdraw from Lebanon and unwillingness to fulfill Israel's obligations to them was indicative of Israel's shaky commitment to a fair, lasting peace.

Others' accounts also call into question Ross's argument that the Palestinians made no meaningful concessions. During the time between the Wye River meeting (October 1998) and Taba (January 2001), the Palestinians acknowledged that some settlements would remain on the West Bank in any final deal, accepted that the right of return of Palestinian refugees would be mostly symbolic, acceded to the division of Jerusalem, and eschewed the declaration of an independent Palestinian state before conclusion of a final peace settlement. While a fair case can be made that the PA did not do enough to prevent the September 2000 al-Aqsa riots, the uprising was sparked by

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Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Temple Mount and fanned by the brutal Israeli suppression of the protests. (It is worth remembering that Arafat begged Barak not to allow Sharon to visit the Temple Mount, but Barak, worried about Sharon's popularity, refused.) Readers will find most of this in Ross's account, but will no doubt wonder why he then concludes that Arafat and the Palestinians bear the lion's share of the responsibility for the peace process's failure.

One source of Ross's bias is structural: by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the United States and Israel had grown so close that no American official could be an honest broker. Indeed, Ross makes no secret that he regarded his team as working to advance the Israeli agenda. In one telling vignette, he reminds Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, "You are the one who launched us on this path with Assad, and Secretary Christopher has been meticulous in acting on the basis of your guidance." Later he scolds Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu for being difficult on some point because "we are working your agenda" with the Palestinians. Acknowledging that the United States was having trouble convincing the Palestinians of its neutrality, Ross later assures Netanyahu that "we would stand by Israel, but to be most helpful to Israel we had to maintain our ability to influence Israel's negotiating partners; we had to be seen as fair and not simply as parroting or presenting Israeli positions."

Ross's account makes clear that Israel and the United States closely co-ordinated their dealings with the Palestinians and other Arabs. Throughout *The Missing Peace*, Ross writes "we" when referring to Israel and United States. His team operated under "a commitment to share everything first with the Israelis." At a critical juncture in the negotiations, for example, Ross gave the Israelis a highly classified briefing about American military operations against Iraq, while offering Arafat a mere news summary. To be sure, there were important

differences within the American team during the negotiations, but Ross was consistently sympathetic to the Israelis' needs. Given the structure of the relationship, it is hardly surprising that the Palestinians had doubts about American evenhandedness. Ross's narrative shows that they had good reason.

Like most Americans, Ross believes that Israel's security is precarious, even though Israel has hundreds of nuclear weapons, spends more each year on its

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military than its Arab neighbors combined, and enjoys the support of the world's only superpower. This belief made Ross hesitant to criticize Israeli leaders for dragging their feet or making unreasonable demands of the Arabs. Moreover, like many Americans, Ross believes that the primary obstacle to peace is Israel's strategic vulnerability and the only way to make progress is to make Israel more secure. Finally, Ross shares the widely held assumption that U.S. and Israeli interests are largely compatible, if not identical. At one point he notes, "the United States has a special relationship with Israel, enduring regardless of who was in office." The implication is that we are equally obliged to support Yitzhak Rabin or Ariel Sharon, or even the more radical Israeli expansionists who think that Sharon is too soft.

In addition to the structural incentives that would lead almost any American official to tilt toward the Israeli side, there are also personal reasons that Ross would be inclined to favor the Israelis. As Ross acknowledges, "I identified with [Israel's] people, and my own Jewish identity became more important to me as a result. Intrinsicly, I believed that Israel had a right to exist and that the Jewish people needed and deserved a homeland, a place of refuge." In other words, Ross was a committed Zionist.

There is, of course, no reason to think that an American Jew cannot be objective, but when one's religious and ethnic identity becomes intertwined with the fate of another country, it is hardly surprising if one has trouble maintaining a balanced perspective. This problem naturally is not unique to Zionist Jews; there are also an increasing number of Christian Zionists who have a significant impact on U.S. foreign policy. Most of us would similarly make allowance for

what an anti-Castro Cuban-American had to say about policy toward Cuba or what an Armenian-American might say about the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

For Ross, the attachments to Israel run particularly deep. Ross makes clear that he had close relationships with many Israeli leaders, including Rabin and Barak. "I had seen my friend Natan Sharansky for Shabbat," Ross reminisces, "it was nearly a ritual for me to have Shabbat dinner with Natan and his family." He also vacationed in Israel twice during this period, even though he was spending weeks on end there conducting negotiations. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright remarked on this fact, at one point chiding him for taking a "busman's holiday." There is, of course, nothing wrong with a private American citizen doing this, but when an American official like Ross does so, it raises questions about his objectivity. (One might say the same thing about National Security Council staffer Elliot Abrams's recent vacation in Israel, after which the Bush administration reversed the policy of every U.S. president and endorsed Israel retaining a key part of the West Bank.) The question is not whether Ross is a loyal American—he clearly is—but whether he faced a conflict of interest given his personal views on Israel. Assigning the task of ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to someone so

strongly attached to one side was not a recipe for success.

In contrast, Ross's relationship with the Palestinians was much more distant. There were few visits to the houses of Palestinian leaders, aside from business meetings at Arafat's official residences. Ross liked and admired some of his Palestinian colleagues, especially those who criticized Arafat, but his relationship with them was nowhere near as close as it was with most of the Israeli team. Other Palestinians annoyed him, such as Minister of Local Government Saeb Erekat. (To be fair, Ross found Netanyahu equally annoying). But Ross reserves special disdain for Arafat. After Camp David, Ross confessed, "I feared I might lose my cool with Arafat. I had had it with him." Ross's epitaph on the peace process says it all: "Did we ultimately fail because of the mistakes that Barak made and the mistakes that Clinton made? No, each, regardless of his tactical mistakes, was ready to confront history and mythology. Only one leader was unable or unwilling to confront history and mythology: Yasir Arafat."

It is impossible to know whether a more evenhanded intermediary would

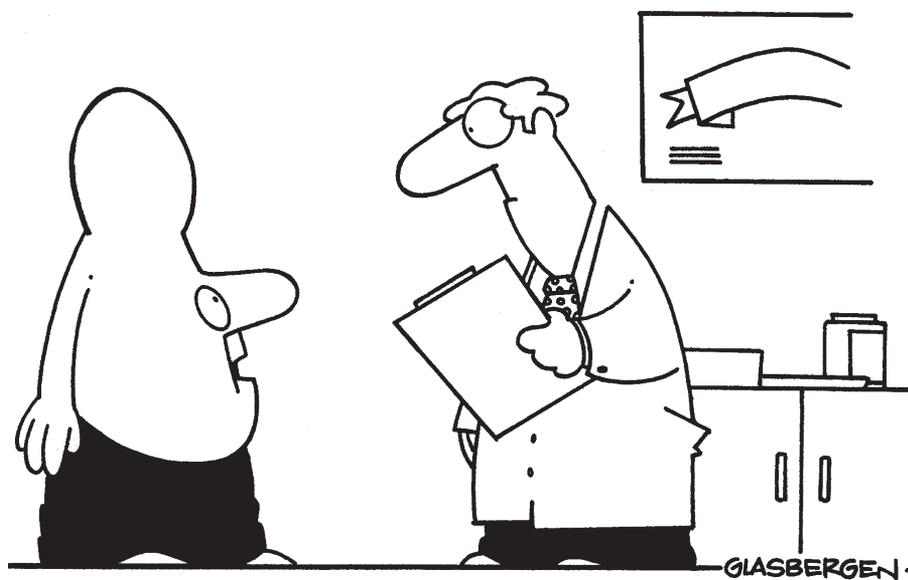
have been more successful, but Ross's lack of empathy for the Palestinian plight cannot have helped. Dismissing their substantive reservations at various points in the peace process as tactical moves, Ross attributes the basest of motives to the Palestinians. In his view, they resisted compromises simply to try to get a better bargain. In a callous moment, Ross concludes that "being a victim has not just become the Palestinian condition: it has become a strategy."

The Israelis understood that Ross and the Americans tilted in their direction and behaved accordingly. Ross recounts an interesting discussion with President Clinton after the two had a testy exchange with Prime Minister Netanyahu. "President Clinton observed: 'He thinks he is the superpower and we are here to do whatever he requires.' No one on our side disagreed with that assessment." At Wye River, Netanyahu was so insistent that Clinton sweeten the deal for Israel by releasing convicted Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard that he nearly caused the resignation of CIA Director George Tenet. Lest we think that such chutzpah was idiosyncratic to one prime minister, Ross writes, "as was often the case with

Barak, he assumed that the President would simply accommodate his schedule to fit the timetable the Prime Minister deemed appropriate. That the President of the United States might have other obligations—like, for example, going to India and Pakistan—was immaterial and could be adjusted." At Camp David, Clinton became so exasperated with Barak that he exploded: "I went to Shepardstown and was told nothing by you for four days. I went to Geneva and felt like a wooden Indian doing your bidding I will not let it happen here [at Camp David]. I will simply not do it." In the end, however, that is pretty much what Clinton did. As long as Israeli leaders treat U.S. presidents as their servants, and as long as U.S. presidents accept that role, the prospects for peace remain dim. Indeed, by enabling Israel's leaders to persist in the policy of occupation that fuels Palestinian violence, America's unthinking support has not made Israel any safer.

Ross's *Missing Peace* is an indispensable history but a one-sided assessment. The book provides crucial detail about the negotiations through the eyes of a key participant. But Ross's pointed indictment of Yasir Arafat and the Palestinians does not even follow from the historical account Ross provides—there is plenty of blame to be shared by all three parties. This disconnect between Ross's history and his analysis is in part the result of structural bias inherent in the U.S.-Israeli relationship: any American policymaker is likely to find it hard to be objective in trying to broker a deal involving a U.S. ally. But this bias is compounded for Ross by his personal commitment to Israel. It used to be that we worried about diplomats going native after long years in the field; in Ross's case, that happened before he ever left home. ■

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"My wife says I need a face lift, but I'm afraid it will make me look weird."

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[*Mussolini: The Last 600 Days of Il Duce*, Ray Moseley, Taylor Trade Publishing, 432 pages]

Salò Saga

By R.J. Stove

“The people would be just as noisy if they were going to see me hanged.”

— Oliver Cromwell, commenting on a crowd that cheered him

ONE SELDOM OBSERVED benefit of the Cold War's end is the fact that we can now rejoice in a substantial Mussolini bibliography, to which this book mostly constitutes a valuable addition. Until the early 1990s, precious few English-language descriptions of the *Duce* transcended crassly simplistic agitprop: the poor innocent oppressed Italian masses (four legs good) groaning under the tyranny of a satanic blood-drinking totalitarian (two legs bad). Even such shrewd and diligent Mussolini biographers as Christopher Hibbert seemed almost apologetic about mentioning data that hinted at Communists' activities in controlling and memorializing wartime resistance. In 2004 the student of Italian Fascism is better off than he has ever been. Admittedly, drab apparatchiks like Denis Mack Smith and euphoric Jacobins like Richard Bosworth continue to wield historiographical influence entirely disproportionate to their talents. Bosworth recently boasted of “cling[ing] to the political ideas and ideals I learned in the 1960s (and which go back to 1789)”; this confession is somehow meant to reassure readers. The difference between today and the Cold War epoch is that these pundits no longer have the field to themselves. Such self-confessed iconoclasts as the Englishman Nicholas Farrell can now gain international attention via major publishing houses for their own, much fresher and less parochial, approaches to the *Duce*. Ray Moseley, former *Chicago Tribune* correspondent,

lacks Farrell's impish panache—in any case, Farrell's own volume seemingly appeared too late for Moseley to have consulted it—but his analyses of prominent Fascists (he devoted his last tome to Mussolini's playboy son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano) reveal a Farrell-like love of primary-source material unknown to most non-Italians.

As his subtitle indicates, Moseley here concerns himself with Mussolini's decline: above all, with his notional 1943-1945 rule over Northern Italy's Salò Republic (*Repubblica Sociale Italiana*, to use its official title), an administration kept in being solely by German arms, when kept in being at all. Very early in Salò's life, just in case Mussolini retained any reckless notions of genuine independence, Croatia's Ante Pavelic annexed—with Hitler's permission—whole slices from the Italian northeast. To this pass, the *Duce's* own dithering had brought him. Even at the height of his political powers he had been, on the whole, one of the least despotic despots whom 20th-century history can show. Italians of high and low degree alike honored the 1938 anti-Jewish legislation more in the breach than in the observance. For two decades the *Duce* boasted of his tough-

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guy temperament, echoing King Lear's promise to “do such things—what they are yet I know not—but they shall be the terrors of the earth.” Alas for him, he induced scarcely greater awe through such fulminations than Lear did through browbeating Regan and Goneril. His Salò role (“They call me ‘Benito Quisling,’ and they're right,” he once said) exacerbated, rather than engendered, the war in his soul between public bluster and private squeamishness.

Nor did he dare to crush those regional Fascist bosses who had endangered his reign ever since it started in

1922—the likes of Roberto Farinacci and Tullio Tamburini, who considered him a verbose weakling. Of Franco's, or Salazar's, surreptitious strong-arm tactics against over-ambitious colleagues (let alone Hitler's Night of the Long Knives or Stalin's purges), Mussolini was incapable. He equally failed to adumbrate those progressive postcolonial African statesmen who engineered political famines in best Ethiopian style, or who vanquished potential rivals by eating them.

“*Duce*,” the *Führer* lamented, “you are too good, you will never be a dictator.” Otto Skorzeny, who had rescued Mussolini from incarceration in the Apennines, expressed similar amazement: “He's not a dictator any more, he's a philosopher.” On occasion the “philosopher” showed unexpected mettle: ensuring, for instance, that Salò's currency unit remained the lira rather than the German mark. Yet he spent most of the Salò period in a kind of trance, trying without effect to keep the peace between his wife Rachele and his mistress Claretta Petacci; grinding out logorrheic memoirs (“I am like a mad poet,” he told his bewildered Culture Minister Fernando Mezza-

soma); avidly collecting newspaper articles, however mendacious, about himself; and obsessively soliloquizing about how history would judge him. (He numbered among his heroes Napoleon, Mazzini, Garibaldi, Bismarck—and Cromwell, whose cadaver's fate had foreshadowed Mussolini's own posthumous destiny.)

It required the Jan. 1944 kangaroo-court trial, at Verona, of Ciano and five others—who the previous July had signed a document urging the *Duce* to renounce supreme command of Italy's armed forces—to shock Mussolini into