Transcript for Interview with William Quandt

**Interviewer**: What role did you play in the peace process?

**William Quandt:** I was one of several advisers to President Carter, Brzezinski and Vance—they were the decision makers—and I played a significant role in the drafting of the Camp David Accords, but the big decisions were made by the President.

**Interviewer:** How intimate were the relationships between the three leaders?

**Quandt:** Carter developed a close relationship with Sadat. By contrast, he never quite trusted Begin, feeling that he had been misled by him early on and that Begin did not negotiate in good faith. Still, he saw that he was a strong leader and that he would have to work with him. Begin and Sadat did not get along at all and barely spoke after the first couple of days at Camp David.

**Interviewer:** To what extent was Carter motivated by moral obligation or political agendas?

**Quandt:** It is never easy to be sure about what exactly motivates anyone, but I do think that Carter felt a special commitment to peace in the holy land because of his religious convictions; but he was also aware of the strategic interests. After the Egypt-Israel deal, he acted like a politician worried about reelection—e.g., taking Vance off the case and appointing Robert Strauss as negotiator on Israel-Palestinian issues.  That's when I left the National Security Council. 

**Interviewer:** Did Carter's "outsider status" in US politics contribute to or detract from the success of the negotiations?

**Quandt:** I'm not sure it made much difference.  As an outsider, he may have been less concerned with poll numbers and normal political considerations.  His key strength in the negotiations came from his mastery of a lot of the detail involved in the conflict, a determination to find a solution, and an unwillingness to be overly influenced by domestic political considerations.  But, of course, these outsider qualities also insured, along with the Iran hostage crisis, that he would only serve one term.

**Interviewer:** For Carter, Begin, and Sadat, how did their personal experiences shape their perspective of the conflict and how they negotiated during the Camp David Accords?

**Quandt:** Carter’s experience with civil rights in the United States made him believe that tough problems could be solved. Perhaps his religious beliefs also counted, and his engineering background made him very methodical, organized. Begin's family history made him very distrustful of Arabs, non-Jews; his lawyerly training made him a stickler for word nuances.  Sadat would have loved to be an actor; he loved the big moves, the stage. He had little patience for detail.

**Interviewer:** Did each side have a particular goal or objective during the negotiations? Were these objectives reached, or was a compromise forged?

**Quandt:** The US wanted to end as much of the Arab-Israel conflict as possible. Sadat also, but mostly he wanted return of Sinai and good relations with the US. Begin wanted to get Egypt out of the conflict and to make a separate peace that would not touch on the Palestine issue.  Begin got most of what he wanted.

**Interviewer:** What were the short-term implications of the Camp David Accords in both domestic and international affairs?

**Quandt:** Egypt did get its territory back; a model of sorts was established for future peacemaking. Israel felt more secure; the US showed it could produce results. But other Arabs shunned Egypt, expelled it from the Arab league, and Sadat was assassinated in 1981. Also, Israel felt freer after peace with Egypt to undertake reckless invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

**Interviewer:** Did the agreement establish a precedent for later peace agreements?

**Quandt:** Yes and no.  On the Palestinian front, the Oslo accords maintained the idea of a five year transition. Whenever Israel and Syria negotiated in the 1990s and early 2000s, they used a model derived from the Egypt-Israel "land for peace" approach. But those efforts both failed. Jordan and Israel made peace without major US mediation, but the issues there were easier.

**Interviewer:** Would you consider this agreement to be a turning point in history? Why or why not?

**Quandt:** Yes, in that it put an end to the pattern of wars that had prevailed in the me up until then (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973). But it left many issues unresolved –especially the Palestine issue—and that continues to be a source of major tension in the region.

**Interviewer:** Thank you very much, Professor Quandt.