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Ariel Sharon Is Missed

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(<http://naegeleblog.files.wordpress.com/2009/12/dscf29392.jpg>) By T. D. Naegele (<http://www.naegele.com/attorneys.html#tdn>)[1]

It seems like ages since Ariel Sharon (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_Sharon) slipped into a coma from which he never returned, much less as a political force in this earthly world. Yet, perhaps he was there after all, resting with the knowledge that he was a man of his times, who had shaped and reshaped history.

He was a complex human being who produced seemingly inconsistent policies. By being the architect of Israel's (<http://maps.google.com/maps?>

[ll=31.7833333333,35.2166666667&spn=10.0,10.0&q=31.7833333333,35.2166666667&t=h](http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=31.7833333333,35.2166666667&spn=10.0,10.0&q=31.7833333333,35.2166666667&t=h)) settlement expansion in the West Bank (<http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=32.0,35.3833333333&spn=0.1,0.1&q=32.0,35.3833333333&t=h>) and Gaza, despite Palestinian and international protests, he appeared to be forever at odds with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, and thus an opponent of peaceful coexistence between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and lasting peace in the Middle East (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Middle_East). Henry A. Kissinger (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Kissinger) noted some years ago: "For most of his career, Sharon's strategic goal was the incorporation of the West Bank into Israel by a settlement policy designed to prevent Palestinian self-government over significant contiguous territory."

However, he came seemingly full circle and withdrew from Gaza and removed Jewish settlers from both Gaza and the West Bank, and returned their lands to the Palestinians. Like the hard-liner Richard Nixon who opposed communists and their ideology throughout his life, yet opened the door to China, Sharon was an enigma. Both were skilled chess players; and perhaps Sharon supported expansive settlements merely as a bargaining chip that would be discarded when it served the interests of peace, or no longer had any strategic value.

He seemed to be a pragmatist who concluded that it was in Israel's best interests to defend only those lands that were militarily and politically defensible, and sacrifice the rest, and to jettison the settlers who had served as pawns in a larger chess game. By zigging and then zagging, and by being a key player in the establishment of the right-wing Likud Party and then breaking from it to found the centrist Kadima Party, Sharon proved to be an able and skillful politician right up to the end of his career.

He fought in a Jewish militia opposed to British control; and he served in Israel's war of independence with the Arab states and in subsequent wars, and was considered a war hero by many Israelis. He was wounded in a battle to break the siege of Jerusalem and carried its effects all of his life, including near blindness in one eye; and he was grazed by a bullet in the head during a battle many years later.

He visited the Temple Mount to emphasize Israel's claim of sovereignty, outraging Muslims and provoking widespread violence; and he is blamed for the ruthless killing and suffering of countless Palestinians. Yet, his strength was being more in tune with Israeli public opinion than anyone else. Ghazi al Saadi, a Palestinian commentator, described Sharon as "the first Israeli leader who stopped claiming Israel had a right to all of the Palestinians' land." He added: "A live Sharon is better for the Palestinians now, despite all the crimes he has committed against us."

Like Yitzhak Rabin (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yitzhak_Rabin) before him, whose mantle he assumed, history will judge Sharon's accomplishments and speculate as to what a difference his continued leadership might have meant in the future. It is certain, however, that Likud's Benjamin Netanyahu (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Benjamin_Netanyahu) is no Ariel Sharon, nor does he hold a candle to Rabin. Indeed, Rabin's widow Leah—who was described by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate (<http://maps.google.com/maps?ll=59.9116666667,10.7336111111&spn=0.01,0.01&q=59.9116666667,10.7336111111&t=h>) and former Prime Minister Shimon Peres as a "lioness"—believed it was the climate of hate that Netanyahu created during the election campaign of 1995, which laid the groundwork for a Jew to assassinate her husband. She never forgave Netanyahu and detested him.[2]

The fact that Netanyahu attained his coveted goal of leading Israel again, after his scandal-ridden previous attempt at it, may have changed the region's history forever. He was the nemesis of both Rabin and Sharon, two giants; and his return from political oblivion may still be marked by untold chaos at a time when political and military adventurism and demagoguery are the last things that are needed from the leader of Israel.

It was a fateful day, however, when a born-again Christian and a Jew, one slim and fit and the other decidedly rotund, shared a helicopter ride; and Sharon gave then-Texas Governor George W. Bush (<http://www.georgewbushlibrary.smu.edu/>) a tour over the Israeli-occupied territories (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Israeli-occupied_territories). On that day and in the days that followed, a bond of mutual respect emerged between Bush and Sharon that would survive the roller coaster of international politics. They were a political odd couple who seemed to instinctively trust each other at a time in history when trust was a rare currency vis-à-vis the seemingly intractable problems of the Middle East.

Trust has been a missing ingredient during much of the political life of Netanyahu, who has been perceived as being untrustworthy by countless Israelis and leaders of other nations. Indeed, he has served as a foil against which Sharon's accomplishments may be viewed and measured. Sharon emerged as the right leader for Israel at the right time, just as Rabin had done before him. Netanyahu's presence on Israel's political scene makes Sharon's greatness and that of Rabin stand out in bold relief by comparison.

Sharon's stroke and coma deprived the Bush administration of its closest working partner in the Middle East. The clock began ticking in the region again; and there have been reports that Israel will attack Iran's nuclear installations. I am forever reminded of what a prominent American (who is a Jew and a strong supporter of Israel) told me several years ago: "I have long thought that Israel will not make it, if

only because of what are cavalierly called WMD [weapons of mass destruction] and its very tight geographical compression. All else is immaterial, including the Palestinians, or us, or the nature of Israel's [government]."

I was stunned by this person's words, and I have reflected on them many times since. Henry Kissinger added several years ago: "Far too much of the debate within the Palestinian camp has been over whether Israel should be destroyed immediately by permanent confrontation or in stages in which occasional negotiations serve as periodic armistices." I do not subscribe to the notion that anything is inevitable or "written." However, it is courageous and visionary men like Rabin and Sharon who have guided Israel through perilous times, when lesser men would have foundered.

Netanyahu campaigned on a hard-line platform that would grant to a new Palestinian state only a fraction of West Bank land; and effectively, he has brought the peace process to a screeching halt because he opposes such a state entirely, whether he articulates it or not. When Likud suffered a defeat in the Israeli elections, with Netanyahu at its helm, he characteristically tried to deflect blame from himself by claiming that a comatose Ariel Sharon was responsible for the political "crash."

The Wall Street Journal put it mildly in an editorial: "[Netanyahu's] attempt to blame a dying and helpless Mr. Sharon for Likud's drubbing . . . was not a class act." Indeed, it was tasteless, opportunistic, and among the reasons why so many people view Netanyahu as being pathetic and demonic—but it was certainly consistent with his treatment of both Rabin and Sharon.

Most Israelis believe at least one of two long-time dreams is unattainable; namely, the idea of a "Greater Israel," and of a negotiated peace with the Palestinians. Contrariwise, the Palestinians have steadfastly refused to repudiate their dream of a "greater Palestine,"

stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean, which—in the words of Yossi Klein Halevi, an Israeli journalist and writer—“would supplant and destroy the Jewish state.”

Halevi further opined: “The settlement movement ignored the moral corruption of occupation and the demographic threat to Israel’s identity as a Jewish and democratic state posed by the forcible absorption of several million Palestinians into Israeli society.” And he added: “Israel will almost certainly find itself without Greater Israel—and without peace. . . . Confronted with the possibility of a nuclear Iran committed to Israel’s destruction and with a terrorist state emerging in Gaza and the West Bank, Israelis need the sustenance of dreams.”

President Bush pledged to help create an independent Palestinian state before the end of his second term, which suffered a fatal blow with the loss of Sharon, and ended Sharon’s personal ambition to set Israel’s permanent borders too. *The Times* of the UK quoted one official as saying: “It [was] unbelievable. He was the Prime Minister. Nothing moved without going through him. Everything was connected to him and then he faded away,” the official said, with a click of his fingers.

Perhaps the return to business as usual showed the strength of Israel’s democracy and political system, which has been surprisingly stable; or maybe it was a sign that his stroke had not shaken the country to the same extent as the assassination of Rabin. Or maybe it was simply another reminder of how fame is fleeting, and the public’s attention span is short in Israel and other media-driven societies, especially in the age of 24-hour news cycles. Yet, Sharon is missed; that much is certain—and I never thought that I would write those words or feel this way.^[3]

I disagreed with his settlement policies for many years, believing they were harmful to the settlers who trusted him because ultimately they would feel betrayed; and that such policies were unnecessarily confrontational and antagonistic to the Palestinians. However, I have

missed “Arik,” and I know people in various parts of the world, Jews and non-Jews alike, feel the same way. He was a giant of Israeli politics. More than that, he was a lion—albeit a rotund one—God love him.

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<http://naegeleblog.files.wordpress.com/2014/01/ariel-sharon.jpg>

[1] Timothy D. Naegele was counsel to the United States Senate’s Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, and chief of staff to Presidential Medal of Freedom and Congressional Gold Medal recipient and former U.S. Senator Edward W. Brooke (R-Mass). He practices law in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles with his firm, Timothy D. Naegele & Associates, which specializes in Banking and Financial Institutions Law, Internet Law, Litigation and other matters (see www.naegele.com (<http://www.naegele.com/>) and http://www.naegele.com/naegele_resume.html)). He has an undergraduate degree in economics from UCLA, as well as two law degrees from the School of Law (Boalt Hall), University of California, Berkeley, and from Georgetown University. He is a member of the

District of Columbia and California bars. He served as a Captain in the U.S. Army, assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency at the Pentagon, where he received the Joint Service Commendation Medal. Mr. Naegele is an Independent politically; and he is listed in Who's Who in America, Who's Who in American Law, and Who's Who in Finance and Business. He has written extensively over the years (*see, e.g.,* www.naegele.com/whats_new.html#articles (http://www.naegele.com/whats_new.html#articles)), and can be contacted directly at tdnaegele.associates@gmail.com; *see also* Google search: Timothy D. Naegele (<http://lmgty.com/?q=Timothy+D+Naegele>)

[2] *See* <http://naegeleblog.wordpress.com/2010/02/20/israels-senseless-killings-and-war-with-iran/> (<http://naegeleblog.wordpress.com/2010/02/20/israels-senseless-killings-and-war-with-iran/>) ("Israel's Senseless Killings And War With Iran") and <http://naegeleblog.wordpress.com/2012/03/08/the-madness-of-benjamin-netanyahu/> (<http://naegeleblog.wordpress.com/2012/03/08/the-madness-of-benjamin-netanyahu/>) ("The Madness Of Benjamin Netanyahu") (*see also* the comments beneath both articles).

[3] *See also* <http://world.time.com/2014/01/03/israel-wakes-up-to-ariel-sharon-as-former-prime-minister-nears-death/?iid=gs-main-lead> (<http://world.time.com/2014/01/03/israel-wakes-up-to-ariel-sharon-as-former-prime-minister-nears-death/?iid=gs-main-lead>) ("Israel Wakes Up to Ariel Sharon as Former Prime Minister Nears Death") and <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/ariel-sharon-war-of-independence-disengagement-settlements.html> (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/ariel-sharon-war-of-independence-disengagement-settlements.html>) ("Ariel Sharon's decisions shaped today's Israel") and http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/01/23/060123fa_fact_s (http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/01/23/060123fa_fact_shav GENERAL");

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(<http://mwcnews.net/focus/politics/35072-sharon.html>) (“The Guardian Laments Sharon”)

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