

UNDER COVER

The Captain and the King

Richard and Saladin are dead. Fittingly, Moshe Dayan died within a few days of the assassination of Anwar el-Sadat. Not all competition makes us better. The *agon* is defined by the antagonist, and we need great rivals to achieve what is best in us. Sadat and Dayan were fated players, cast for great drama.

Dayan was a captain out of an epic, appealing because his victories were won with so much dash and so little blood. The conditions of desert war made this possible, of course, as they did for Rommel and his allied counterparts during World War II. But one must *rise* to conditions, and Dayan did. Dayan reminded us of a time when military life was defined by courage rather than bureaucratic calculation and when the glory and horror of war were not hidden in abstractions. Flamboyant, supremely personal, he recalled the great cadence of Job: "He mocketh fear and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword....He saith among the trumpets aj, aj, and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains and the shouting."

Yet it was Sadat who really moved us. We were shocked, of course, by the manner of his death, but that cannot explain why America grieved for Sadat so deeply. No foreign leader in my memory has been so universally and so intensely mourned. It was as if Sadat had been one of our own, lamented like the Kennedys and Dr. King.

Our admiration for Sadat, however, distorts and muddles what he meant to us. He was not, for example, a "great democrat," as one of our spokesmen called him. He had a remarkable ability to understand and persuade the Egyptian people, but his regime and his temperament were authoritarian, impatient with the half-measures and hesitations of democratic life. They called Sadat a president, but he was, in the best sense of the word, a king. Nor was Sadat a "man of peace," except in a very special sense.

Sadat was a patriot, passionately devoted to his country and its people. When he spoke to the Knesset, he invoked the special meaning of one's land, sacred beyond price, and so it was for him. He was willing to

sacrifice anything for Egypt—his life and fortune certainly, but also his honor. The same nationalism that made him expel the Russians and defy the opinion of other Arab regimes also made him willing to traffic with the Nazis if, by so doing, he could free Egypt from Britain. Patriotism, like all love, is sometimes blind, and it is always a limited virtue. Yet for all of that, patriotism is an excellence. Sadat reminded Americans that love of country can be ennobling and something more than boast and bombast.

Those who love their country for itself do not need the envy or fear of others. Genuine patriotism is soft and a little secret and is manifested in sacrifice of self rather than in egotism of country. In his highest acts Sadat was not concerned whether other Arabs (or anyone else) thought him weak and unmanly. He knew, with Woodrow Wilson, that there is such a thing as being "too proud to fight" and that there is a love of country too strong to lower itself to bellicosity. Sadat, in other words, rebuked American patriotism for the cheap goods it so often is. His life demands the recognition that "humiliation" is not the worst thing for a leader or a people. In fact, the humble are exalted because they can submit to something grander than the self. Sadat's patriotism points beyond itself. Just as great leaders sacrifice themselves for country, great countries dedicate themselves to things beyond country.

Sadat appeared on the American scene, after he had turned to the West, at a time when we lacked political heroes and despaired of public life. He filled a great need in us. He was eloquent, of course, even in a language not his own, and this helped make him attractive, since our own political rhetoric has become so debased. But it is more important that Sadat's deeds suited his words. He was great-spirited, in contrast to the meanness that governs us nowadays. Even on its own terms, the Reagan administration tells us that political greatness requires an appeal to avarice and that the good of the poor (in the long run) can derive from hardheartedness. Sadat understood that, to the contrary, high ends require noble means, and that politics must sometimes be gallant to be good. Sadat showed us what politics can be, and thereby exposed our political practice for the drab thing it is.

The most excellent political leaders always inspire mixed feelings. They show us exalted possibilities and reveal our low conduct. They make clear what nature permits and commands, taking away our weak excuse that we are only yielding to the "real world." Our admiration for the great is often a cheat. We would rather *revere* leaders than follow them. And so it is that human beings repeatedly kill their kings rather than face the royal verdict on their lives. But slain kings often triumph, and we will contribute to Sadat's victory if we learn from and immitate his magnificent example.

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