

A Washington memoir

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Just 50 years ago, during the cocktails preceding a UJA dinner for Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir at the New York Hilton, Ambassador Yitzhak Rabin received a message.

‘Please phone Henry Kissinger. Urgently.’

Rabin placed the call. Richard Nixon’s national security adviser was somewhat agitated. The White House had received a request from an embattled King Hussein. Kissinger’s question to Rabin: Would Israel’s air force attack the Syrian tank columns that had invaded northern Jordan—and save the king?

As Rabin recounts in his memoirs, he “stole Golda from the cocktail party and moved off into another room” to tell her about the Kissinger phone call. They phoned Acting Prime Minister Yigal Allon and Defence Minister Moshe Dayan in Jerusalem, and waited for Kissinger to speak to Nixon and call back.

There was much to discuss, but not much time to decide. Some 300 Syrian tanks had begun moving into Jordan on 19 and 20 September 1970. Nominally, to support the Palestinian terrorists facing defeat in the Jordanian army’s brutal ‘Black September’ campaign against them. More ominously, with Moscow’s support, to overthrow Hussein and gain control of a Western ally and Israel’s neighbour.

Israel was ready to move. But in addition to the promise of American political support, Rabin asked the United States to protect its Egyptian flank if it came under attack along the Suez Canal from Soviet forces.

Moscow had armed and backed Gamal Abdel Nasser in the three-year War of Attrition that had followed the 1967 Six Day War. Just weeks earlier, on 30 July 1970, Israeli Phantoms had shot down five Soviet MiG-21s over Egypt in an encounter that led the Kremlin to threaten severe retaliation against Israel.

Now, just seven weeks later, Jordan's fate hung in the balance.

So as soon as Nixon and Kissinger gave the green light, the IDF strengthened its forces on the Golan Heights and its air force prepared to intervene. Through diplomatic channels, Washington warned Moscow bluntly to persuade the Syrians to turn back. To reinforce the diplomacy, Nixon put the 82nd Airborne Division on alert and ordered the Mediterranean Sixth Fleet's aircraft carriers eastward. A group of American officers took off from one of the carriers for Israel to plan combined operations.

In the tense 48 hours that followed, Rabin became the interlocutor between the Israeli government, the IDF, and the White House's Situation Room. In his words, he became "the major source of intelligence on the conflict" in Nixon's Washington.

The IDF's former chief-of-staff, Major-General Yitzhak Rabin (ret) was in his element. He was not only at the centre of events; he was orchestrating them.

In the event, the Jordanian army performed better than expected, Moscow pressured Hafez al-Assad, then Syria's defence minister, and Damascus withdrew the tanks. The crisis was over. A wider war had been prevented.

Summarised this way, the September 1970 crisis may strike today's reader as just another chapter in the plethora of Cold War dramas and crises in the Middle East. But it was far more than that. It was one of those real turning points in the game of nations. Especially for Rabin. Then, and now.

Then, because Rabin's leadership during the crisis was a key factor in creating the 'special relationship' between Washington and Jerusalem.

Now, because the 25th anniversary of his assassination is another opportunity for reappraising his achievement and legacy. Which is why I believe Rabin's time in Washington as ambassador deserves far more attention than it has received.

As indeed do two other significant contributions he made to Israel's history.

In his resignation statement as prime minister in 1977, Rabin said that he hoped he'd done his duty as the IDF's chief-of-staff in preparing it for the Six Day War, as ambassador in Washington, and as a prime minister who'd helped to heal the nation's wounds and divisions after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. My focus in this essay is on Rabin as ambassador in Washington. But it's part of the wider argument that Rabin's earlier achievements—each of which were individually enough to earn his place as a great Israeli leader—have been largely overshadowed by his last three years as peacemaker and assassinated martyr for the cause.

More on that topic later. First, my own Washington memoir.

In arguing the case for a re-assessment of some Cold War events in 1970, which also call for a re-assessment of Rabin's legacy, I must declare an interest, and a bias.

My interest is that I was also in Washington during these events. As a journalist, I came to know something about the crisis in Jordan from some of the actors directly involved. Including from Rabin himself. And my bias is that in Washington I became, and remain, a 'Rabinist'.

For some two of the more than four years that I was a Washington correspondent, I had the unexpected opportunity and privilege to observe Rabin close-up.

Unexpected, because I hadn't come to Washington in early 1969 to report on Israel, but to open the first Washington bureau for *The Australian*, then Rupert Murdoch's fledgling national newspaper.

But in 1970, I also became the Washington correspondent for the *Jerusalem Post*.

Since the *Post* agreed to let the Mapam daily, *Al Hamishmar*, translate my copy into Hebrew, this opened the door to the Israeli embassy and to Rabin. After all, Mapam was the left-wing party that had joined Mapai—the Labour party to which Rabin belonged—to form Israel's Alignment government after the 1969 elections.

This new role meant I joined the small group of mainly Hebrew-speaking journalists who represented the morning paper *Davar*, and the two evening papers, *Maariv* and *Yediot Achronot*.

And so, much to my surprise, came the privilege. I found myself seeing Rabin regularly at his formal press conferences and off-the-record briefings.

Which he usually gave wreathed in cigarette smoke. Rabin was a notorious chain-smoker. He used the ritual of lighting up and inhaling while he listened to our questions to pause and think about the answers. Which were usually short. Abrupt. Monosyllabic even. And frequently dismissive. Especially about Israeli politicians with whom he disagreed.

Such as Foreign Minister Abba Eban. "Only those people who went to Cambridge (a reference to Eban's alma mater) can understand such matters", Rabin would say derisively. Or, "For this you really have to be a diplomat". Without mentioning Eban by name but

conveying the clear message that he reported directly to Prime Minister Meir, and so could ignore instructions from Eban who, as foreign minister, was nominally his boss.

More generally, as he saw it, the lack of understanding by others in the Israeli government about the big picture in Washington frustrated him. Rabin, however, was ambitious. He looked forward to joining Israel's government as a minister after his term as ambassador.

Knowing that he had to play provincial politics from afar, and that the Israeli press in Washington was the necessary vehicle for playing it, annoyed him. Sometimes the annoyance showed. That was when he would accompany his comments with his trademark grimace—a mix of resigned smile and reluctant acceptance.

Whatever his critics thought about his style, Rabin impressed me from the first meeting. I found his bluntness refreshing. He was a natural leader, and had the gift of commanding your attention. It was clear why he'd inspired confidence as a military leader. Sure. Sometimes he showed his disdain for our journalistic questions, but he always answered them directly. He could sometimes be rude, and it was no fun if you were on the receiving end. But he didn't play favourites, and he didn't bear grudges.

Mercifully, he didn't indulge in 'polispeak waffle' either. And his strategic summaries of the Middle East and Washington's relationship with Jerusalem, delivered in that monotone baritone, were always clear. And enthralling. Especially in the aftermath of the Syrian–Jordanian crisis.

Even so, I hadn't fully understood how close it had come to a much wider super-power conflict until about a year later, when two Washington insiders—Rowland Evans Jr and Robert D Novak—published a book. *Nixon in the White House: The frustration of power* claimed that the Jordanian crisis

presented Nixon with the terrible drama of Kennedy's confrontation with the Russians at Cuba in 1962, with overtones of Armageddon. As one of Nixon's advisers said later, 'Peace hung by the thinnest of threads'.

But unlike Kennedy's Cuba crisis, the imminent danger of war that would put Washington and Moscow in nuclear confrontation was far less publicly exposed than it had been in 1962. Nixon's stage was grander, his diplomatic and military problems more diffuse and complex, but the most exciting parts were played in total secrecy, beyond the capacity of the country to see and judge.

Quite a scoop. If true. Nixon's widely-known wariness about journalists and his reluctance to give interviews was a fact of life for the White House press corps. But Evans and Novak had a reputation for their high-level sources in the administration and Congress, and that included Kissinger and Nixon himself.

So when I read that the Jordanian crisis was 'Nixon's Cuba' and that it had come close to "nuclear confrontation", I found it plausible enough to ask to see Rabin for comment. Somewhat to my surprise, he agreed. Sitting in on the interview at the embassy was Yehuda Avner, then a junior diplomat, later an adviser to Israeli prime ministers, and ambassador to Britain and Australia. In the Canberra role (1992–1995), Avner served during Rabin's second term as prime minister.

Before I could put my first question, Rabin pre-empted the interview: "If you've come here to ask me about what a book says happened a year ago, you can forget about it. I've nothing to tell you." Avner could see that Rabin's response had left me nonplussed, since I'd explained to him why I wanted the interview. "Why don't you ask the ambassador your questions without mentioning the book?" Avner suggested. Which I did.

In broad terms, Rabin confirmed the book's claims about how close the Middle East had come to a clash between Washington and Moscow. Which could have escalated into a nuclear exchange. But Rabin insisted that the interview was on "deep background" and completely off the record. Without a source that would confirm the Evans–Novak version, I couldn't take the story further.

Nevertheless, Rabin had made it abundantly clear that he viewed the crisis as immensely significant. He spoke in detail, for at least an hour, and with more passion than I had ever seen. As a Rabinist who followed his subsequent career after Washington with great interest, the importance he attached to the crisis became even clearer after he published his memoirs in 1979, when in the political wilderness after his 1977 resignation as prime minister.

Looking back, Rabin wrote:

These events (in Jordan) had a far-reaching impact on US–Israel relations. Israel's willingness to co-operate closely with the United States in protecting American interests in the region altered her image in the eyes of many officials in Washington. We were considered as a partner—not equal to the United States, but nevertheless a valuable ally in a vital region during times of crisis.

This wasn't just a self-serving assessment. On 25 September 1970, just days after the worst was over, Kissinger phoned Rabin to convey a formal message from Nixon to Meir.

The president will never forget Israel's role in preventing the deterioration in Jordan, and in blocking the attempt to overturn the regime there. He said that the United States is fortunate in having an ally like Israel in the Middle East. These events will be taken into account in all future developments.

In his memoirs, Rabin downplayed the Nixon message somewhat to describe it “as probably the most far-reaching statement ever made by a president of the United States on the mutuality of the alliance between the two countries. I had never heard anything like it...” There was nothing “probably” about Nixon’s message, and Rabin had indeed never heard “anything like it”. Quite simply, because until 25 September 1970, there had been nothing like it.

The ‘new alliance’ was stress-tested to the maximum during the Yom Kippur War’s early days, when Israel was defending itself desperately against the Egyptian–Syrian onslaught.

It was Nixon, though by then deeply mired in Watergate, who remembered his 1970 pledge to Meir. Acting against the delaying tactics that Kissinger and others in the administration had employed, Nixon ordered the urgent resupply of Israel’s dwindling arms supplies. The US Air Force, flying its C-5 Galaxy transports, airlifted tanks, artillery and ammunition. It enabled the IDF to turn the tide of battle.

What followed in the next four decades almost came to be taken for granted. Yet there was nothing inevitable about the close relationship forged between Washington and Jerusalem during Rabin’s time as ambassador. There were, of course, many players that contributed to the alliance. But Rabin was the conductor who brought them and the events together. Although often tested subsequently—and far from a perfect liaison—the alliance remained a pillar of Israel’s military, political, and economic security for the next 40 years.

Only during the Barak Obama Administration (2009–2017) did the pillar begin to show serious cracks. Which, regardless of how American Jews or Israeli Jews may view him, President Donald Trump has repaired and rebuilt.

There was no 'special relationship' when Rabin arrived as ambassador in 1968. Israel and the Middle East were not on the American agenda. Vietnam, however, and the way it had divided the nation, undoubtedly was.

Shortly after Rabin presented his credentials, Lyndon Baines Johnson announced he wouldn't run for president. A few days later, Martin Luther King was murdered. In the protests and riots that followed, American cities, including streets in Washington, burned in the "long, hot summer". When a Palestinian, Sirhan Sirhan, shot and killed Robert Kennedy Jr, who was running for president, Rabin was deeply concerned.

He'd come to the United States to generate support for Israel's security, and to guarantee it as a lone democracy against the hostile dictatorships surrounding it.

"But what I found was a country in the throes of disintegration," he later wrote. It's to Rabin's abiding credit that he was a quick study, who learned to see beyond the day-to-day upheavals. He applied himself to understanding the American political system, and he learned how to use the levers of power to benefit Israel.

Itamar Rabinovich, his most recent biographer, argues, "As consequential as Rabin's assassination was, it was his life—his decisions and actions—not his death that defines his legacy."

He then considers that legacy in the same company as John F Kennedy's—"the Cuban missile crisis, the Bay of Pigs, the Berlin speech, and the glamorous aura he created". And Abraham Lincoln's—"he ended slavery, preserved the Union, and gave the United States a model for presidential power".

Rabinovich concludes, "Rabin's legacy is shaped by his peace policy in his second tenure, the bold decision he took on both the Palestinian and Syrian tracks, and the high quality of his leadership".

Some may quarrel with the Rabinovich categories of comparison. With Kennedy? With Lincoln? But he makes the important point that, just as their assassinations—especially Kennedy’s—have tended to cloud and even romanticise the historical record, much the same has happened to Rabin.

My quarrel is not with Rabinovich’s focus on Rabin’s life, rather than his death. Where I take issue is over the emphasis he gives to the last three years in assessing that legacy. This isn’t to doubt Rabin’s determination to seek peace. In the last sentence of his memoirs he wrote, “There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that the risks of peace are preferable by far to the grim certainties that await every nation in war.” His experience as a soldier made that conviction even more credible.

When he concluded his first speech to the Knesset in 1992 as prime minister, the thoroughly secular Rabin offered the prayer from Psalms:

“May the Lord give His people strength; may the Lord bless His people with peace.” And he meant it deeply.

But when it comes to the legacies by which leaders are judged, history is indeed a cruel mistress, and doesn’t care much for motivation, however profoundly sincere.

It measures results. In Rabin’s case, his efforts to negotiate peace with Syria, his acceptance of the Oslo accords, and the handshake with Arafat on the White House lawn were brave. Valiant. Courageous. As a Rabinist, I hailed those efforts. I still do. And I mourn and revere his memory.

However, with the hindsight of history—that most beloved muse of pundits and commentators—it’s a moot point whether Rabin’s risks for peace were wise, or served Israel’s best interests. Many disillusioned Israelis, who otherwise regard Rabin as a national hero, and supported him at the time, must wonder.

There is simply no doubt, however, how history has rightly judged Rabin's magnificent service to his people as their commander-in-chief in preparing for war, and going to war. And how, as I would argue, history should judge the ambassador who was instrumental in creating the US-Israel alliance.

A final point about our times and our myths. Lincoln's funeral was not televised. But Kennedy's and Rabin's were.

In the latter's case, the global telecast amplified the trauma already created in Israel and beyond after a Jewish extremist murdered a Jewish prime minister. At a peace rally. Thus, the assassination and the televised funeral coalesced together, almost as if they were one event.

Out of which grew a new Rabin narrative. With its own images, its own reframed history about the Oslo accords, and its own vision of what peace and a two-state solution might have been. "If only".

Images. They remain indelible. President Bill Clinton's "shalom, chaver" tribute as King Hussein listened, head bowed. Granddaughter Noa's impassioned and heartfelt eulogy ("You were the pillar of fire that went ahead of the camp").

And the visible pain in Eitan Haber's shaking hands as he read the words of Shir Leshalom from the folded, blood-stained paper found in Rabin's pocket at the hospital after the shooting.

Eitan Haber. Rabin's loyal adviser, chief-of-staff, and speechwriter. The journalist and military correspondent who gave Rabin the Hebrew words for the sublime and the mundane. Steeped in the Jewish tradition, Haber took the words from the ancient texts, from the prophets and the poets, and from the everyday language of Israelis in the street.

Aged 80, Haber died during Sukkot's intermediate days this year. As I was writing about Rabin, and as Israel prepares for the 25th anniversary. About which, had he lived, Haber would undoubtedly have had something to say, and write. In the event, however, I don't think he'd mind if that was left to another writer, Amos Oz:

Yitzhak Rabin was not a charismatic man, but rather a logical, skillful captain. He was not endowed with Ben Gurion's prophetic passion, nor with Levi Eshkol's warm gracefulness. He did not have Golda Meir's sweeping simplicity, nor Menachem Begin's populist energy. The crowd never responded to him by chanting "Rabin, Rabin".

By being a careful engineer and a precise navigator, his personality embodied the spirit of new Israel, a country seeking not redemption but solutions.