

Review 'Soldiers and Peacemakers' continues insider's view of 'Prime Ministers'

Martin Tsai

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The documentary "The Prime Ministers: Soldiers and Peacemakers" is based on the second half of the memoir "The Prime Ministers: An Intimate Narrative of Israeli Leadership" by Yehuda Avner, who advised former Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin, Menachem Begin and Shimon Peres and also served as Israel's ambassador to Britain, Ireland and Australia during his illustrious political career.

Avner had a front-row seat to the diplomatic and military high-wire acts performed by world leaders negotiating peace in the Middle East. He died in March at 86, so these last interviews of his are of inherent value.

Richard Trank's 2013 "The Prime Ministers: The Pioneers" covered the first half of Avner's book. Now "Soldiers and Peacemakers," which opens Wednesday, thrusts us immediately into the thick of the Rabin and Begin administrations. (For anyone who hasn't seen the first film or isn't well-versed in Israeli history, all the name-dropping can be daunting.)

The new film gives a "West Wing"-esque behind-the-scenes look at key historical events, but with more cocktail-party anecdotes than analysis. For example, Rabin once covered up the fact that he wasn't keeping kosher at a state banquet by lying to Gerald Ford and telling the president that Avner was eating an elaborate vegetarian dish because it was Avner's birthday, not because it was kosher.

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Rabin and Begin belonged to the rival Labor and Likud parties, respectively, so both sides of that story are well represented here. Avner unceremoniously relays the story of the offshore-bank-account scandal that led to Rabin's resignation in 1977.

Even so, Avner's closeness to these situations means that his recollections are subjective. In brokering the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty, President Carter not only orchestrated a Camp David sit-down but also personally shuttled between Jerusalem and Cairo, Avner recalls. But for our president's troubles, Avner still accuses Carter of favoring Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

Indeed, Avner regards every compromise as a raw deal.

Shortly before Rabin's assassination, Avner asks him why he shook Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's hand. Rabin's reply, as recalled by Avner, finally provides that perspective, insight and clarity missing in much of the film.

"He said that we had always considered the Israel-Palestinian conflict a political conflict; and a political conflict, he said, is solvable by political means," Avner says. "However, because of the rise of fundamentalism through Iran, Islamic fundamental rule spread in the whole of the Middle East, and it was turning the political conflict into religious conflict. And there's no solution, he said, to a theological conflict. It's your god against my god. And therefore, I was ready to take this quantum leap and try and break this Gordian knot that Middle East had become by establishing first of all a conversation and then a dialogue with the PLO."

'The Prime Ministers: Soldiers and Peacemakers'

No MPAA rating

Running time: 1 hour, 51 minutes

Playing: Laemmle's Royal, West Los Angeles; Laemmle's Town Center 5, Encino

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