

VARIETY

November 8, 2010

Back Door Channels: The Price of Peace

(Documentary)

By JAY WEISSBERG

A Channel Prods. production. Produced by Harry Hunkele. Executive producers, Donald Tanselle, Matthew Tollin, Arick Wierson. Co-producer, Vered Kollek-Meisel. Directed, edited by Harry Hunkele. Written by Jonathan Hicks, Hunkele, Matthew Tollin, Arick Wierson.

With: Gerry Rafshoon, William Quandt, Wolf Blitzer, Samuel Lewis, Leon Charney, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Andre Azoulay, Abdel Raouf El Reedy, Nabil El Araby, Mohammed Gohar, Henry Kissinger, Nabil Fahmy, Nabil Shaath, Avraham Tamir, Arye Naor, Yael Dayan, Patricia Kahane, Smadar Perry, David Landau, Dan Pattir, Shlomo Gazit, Hisham Khalil, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter, Stuart E. Eizenstat, Ahmed Maher, Meir Rosenne, Robert Lipshutz.



'Back Door Channels: The Price of Peace' looks at Jimmy Carter's behind-the-scenes negotiations between Egypt and Israel.

The behind-the-scenes negotiations leading to the first Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel are revealed in all their riveting complexity in "Back Door Channels: The Price of Peace." PBS docu helmer Harry Hunkele gained unprecedented access to major players for an enthralling dissection of the unlikely path to the groundbreaking treaty, though he bites off more than he can chew and needs to rein in a tendency toward portentous explication, underscored by the incongruous music of Moby and Whale Hawk. Despite such annoyances, the docu deserves widespread exposure on PBS and satcasters.

The Camp David Accords, signed in 1978, marked an unlikely moment when idealism briefly triumphed over obdurate stonewalling. Though never entirely satisfactory, the accords offered the hope of a brighter future in the Middle East; the failure of that initial promise in no way diminishes the achievement, whose memory can still bring a lump to the throat.

Hunkele's accomplishment here is in the way he fleshes out the tortuous routes that led to Camp David. His first 10 minutes can be dispensed with, comprising a ridiculous potted history of Israel

from Genesis to the state's foundation in 1948 (all in five minutes), followed by talking heads explaining, as if to unsavvy children, exactly what "back-door channels" means in a political context.

Once that's out of the way, things get interesting. Unsurprisingly, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat emerges as the real hero, with President Carter a close second and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin the pig-headed obstructionist. Much time is spent on the lead-up to the Camp David meeting and Sadat's conviction that crucial American involvement in hammering out an accord could only come about by playing on Cold War fears of Soviet spheres of influence.

Behind-the-scenes players include expected figures such as King Hassan II of Morocco as well as wildly improbable candidates such as Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who apparently acted as go-between when Begin and then Sadat came for a visit. Once the leaders finally came together at Camp David, Begin tried to kill an agreement, but top ministers Moshe Dayan and Ezer Weizman threatened to resign if he refused a deal.

Carter's role was crucial and courageous, and his testimony here is given with his usual degree of self-abnegation. Stuart E. Eizenstat says all of Carter's advisers warned him that getting involved in such a contentious foreign conflict would be political suicide, and if there's one thing auds should take away from the docu, it's the tragic realization that not one American politician of his stature has been similarly willing to risk their future to push for peace.

Hunkele tries to broaden the film's scope toward the end, unsuccessfully dipping his toe into the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian issue and weakening his thrust. He's arranged the information into segments, with scenes of metal being melted down acting as chapter dividers, which build to an image whose grim irony the helmer appears not to grasp.

Graphics are outlandishly overdone, reaching laughable heights when some key players are identified with an enormous "Status: Deceased" stamp. For a docu this intelligent, such silly reductions are out of place. Music is a problem as well, overlaying discussions and becoming increasingly aggravating.

Camera (color, HD), William Fitzgerald; music, Moby, Whale Hawk; art director, Roland Le Breton; sound, Acme Sound; associate producer, Jenny Lee. Reviewed at Abu Dhabi Film Festival (New Horizons), Oct. 16, 2010. Running time: 102 MIN.

Contact the Variety newsroom at news@variety.com