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Ariel Sharon: Israel's Security-Maker
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Ariel Sharon, at the time prime minister of Israel, suffered a stroke and went into a coma eight years ago this month. He died two weeks ago without ever regaining consciousness. I wrote the following column in 2006 shortly after he entered a coma. The observation is worth repeating. Only the last paragraph is significantly changed.

Throughout his long military and political career, Prime Minister of Israel Ariel Sharon had a one-track mind. He has wanted the people of Israel to live normal, placid lives, lives without the fear (and reality) of suicide bombers, random murders, kidnappings, rocket shellings, military invasion and other violent acts. As a soldier, when he rose through the ranks to become a general, he fought to protect his fellow countrymen from outside invaders. As a politician, whether on the back-benches of the Likud Party or in the office of prime minister, he supported actions he believed would strengthen Israel militarily and weaken its enemies. At all times, he focused like a lightning bolt on Israel's security. His single-mindedness about this one concern explains nearly all key decisions of his military and political career.

Despite the accolades since his collapse from a massive stroke in January 2006, and now his death, Ariel Sharon was not a peacemaker. He never developed policies for making peace with the Palestinians. Although he paid lip service to the Bush administration's "Roadmap for Peace," he met none of its deadlines, undertook none of its confidence-building measures, and participated in none of its intended negotiations. His courageous withdrawal of the Israeli army and civilian settlements from the Gaza Strip during the summer of 2005 was done for security reasons, not to bring about peace.

Sharon acted on a insight that no previous Israeli prime minister had credited: namely, that peace negotiations -- even successful ones -- brought few benefits for Israel. They certainly did not bring security. The peace with Egypt was a "Cold Peace"; it brought only slight cooperation and no friendship. The same was true for the peace with Jordan. The Oslo Peace Accords from the early 1990s turned out to be empty promises with no lasting solutions. During the same period, relationships between Israel and the Palestinians deteriorated, terrorist acts against Israelis increased, and law and order in the occupied territories broke down (due in part to Israeli military operations, to be sure). Security actually worsened.

So rather than try to provide security through peace agreements, Prime Minister Sharon decided to act to

achieve security as his primary goal. If peace came, that would be good as well. The key to security in his mind was the separation of the two parties to the conflict. Sharon did not negotiate a separation; he simply imposed one unilaterally, forcing it on both the Palestinians and his own political party. In the Gaza Strip, Sharon simply withdrew all Israelis, both civilian and military. This left the Palestinians to fend for themselves, by themselves, in their own territory. For the West Bank, Sharon decided to build a security wall all along its borders. As the wall went up, it became clear that it constituted a *de facto* border, imposed without any consultation or negotiation.

Ariel Sharon's main strength as prime minister was that he had a workable plan. It could stop the suicide bombers and, most importantly, it could be implemented because Sharon would simply impose it. It was not subject to the incessant infighting that characterizes Israeli politics, and it was not dependent on the Palestinians who, after the Oslo Accords of the early 1990s, had shown themselves to be unable to agree with the Israelis on anything of significance. It gave hope to a hopeless situation because it broke the logjam that had been in place since the assassination of Prime Minister Israel Rabin.

Since Sharon's incapacitation, no significant movement toward peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians has taken place. While there are a number of reasons for this, a key one is that the security that Sharon imposed has reduced the immediate threat to Israel so that peace negotiations can essentially be ignored. The wall separating Israel from the West Bank has essentially reduced terrorist attacks in Israel to zero. When terrorists in the Gaza Strip shell nearby Israeli territory, a short and sharp invasion, followed by withdrawal, ends it.

While Sharon might have made peace as prime minister, his coma prevented him. And no other prime minister since then has had the need, let alone the courage and the surety, to negotiate peace.