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Film in Review

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Back Door Channels

The Price of Peace

*Opens on Friday in Manhattan.
Directed by Harry Hunkele
1 hour 36 minutes; not rated*

Having just commemorated the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks, another, more hopeful, September anniversary on Saturday is likely to draw no comment. On Sept. 17, 1978, after 13 days of negotiations at Camp David, President Jimmy Carter brought President Anwar el-Sadat of Egypt and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel to the White House to sign an accord to end the state of war between their two countries.

"Back Door Channels: The Price of Peace" is a well-reported history of the Camp David talks, the events that led to them, and the difficult negotiations that followed to forge the peace treaty that was signed the next spring. Directed by Harry Hunkele and

using interviews with more than two dozen involved parties, including Mr. Carter, the film pays particular attention to the behind-the-scenes communications among nongovernment officials who helped the peace process along when official representatives could not. Leon Charney, for example, an American adviser to Ezer Weizman, the Israeli defense minister, practically jump-started the final round of talks when he learned from an Austrian businessman with ties to Egypt that Sadat would approve a deal that simply returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt.

The film also focuses on the interplay among the leaders and the pressures they faced from powerful factions within their camps, and it reminds us what it takes to resolve the seemingly unresolvable: a total commitment from heads of state willing to put themselves at risk. After the treaty Mr. Carter lost significant support among American

Jews and was not re-elected; Begin too saw support from his conservative base erode, and he left office in 1983 much diminished. Sadat, of course, was assassinated in 1981.

Even after this year's overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, Sadat's successor in Egypt, the treaty

still holds, however shakily. But the film is not congratulatory. The treaty, it notes, was supposed to be a first step toward a comprehensive peace settlement for the Middle East. More than 30 years later that larger task remains undone.