

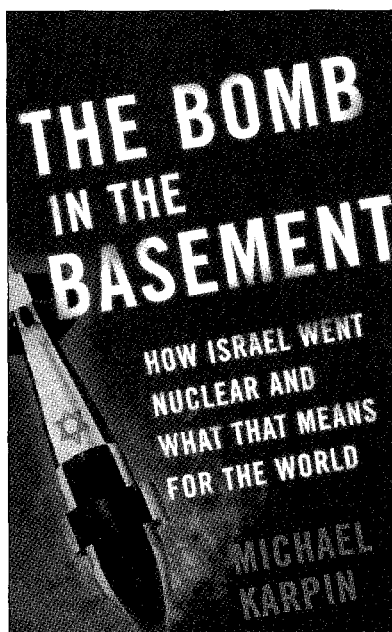
Bombs Away

How Israel got nukes—and set off today's Middle Eastern arms race.

By Jacob Heilbrunn

When Israel successfully developed a nuclear bomb in the 1960s, it inadvertently became a kind of role model for a motley crew of regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere. Being first off the block had big advantages for Israel, especially during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when the threat of a bomb may have helped keep its enemies at bay. But whether it's India, Pakistan, or the most recent nuclear aspirants, Iran and North Korea, the same scenario seems to play, or be playing, itself out with distressing regularity. A regime denies that it's developing nuclear weapons, foils outside observation, and then, *voilà*, manages to enter the nuclear club. It's not hard to see why this would be so. A good deal of hypocrisy surrounds the official five nuclear powers—Britain, France, the United States, China, and Russia—under the terms of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which have sought to keep a monopoly on the product. Take the United States. The Bush administration has sought to lower the threshold for using tactical nuclear bombs while at the same time trying to deny them to pretty much everyone else. Obtaining a bomb has thus become a satisfying way of thumbing one's nose at the imperialistic Yankees and sending them into a frenzy.

Michael Karpin's *The Bomb in the Basement*, therefore, arrives at a timely moment. Karpin, a prominent Israeli television and radio news reporter who



**The Bomb in the Basement:
How Israel Went Nuclear and
What That Means for the World**

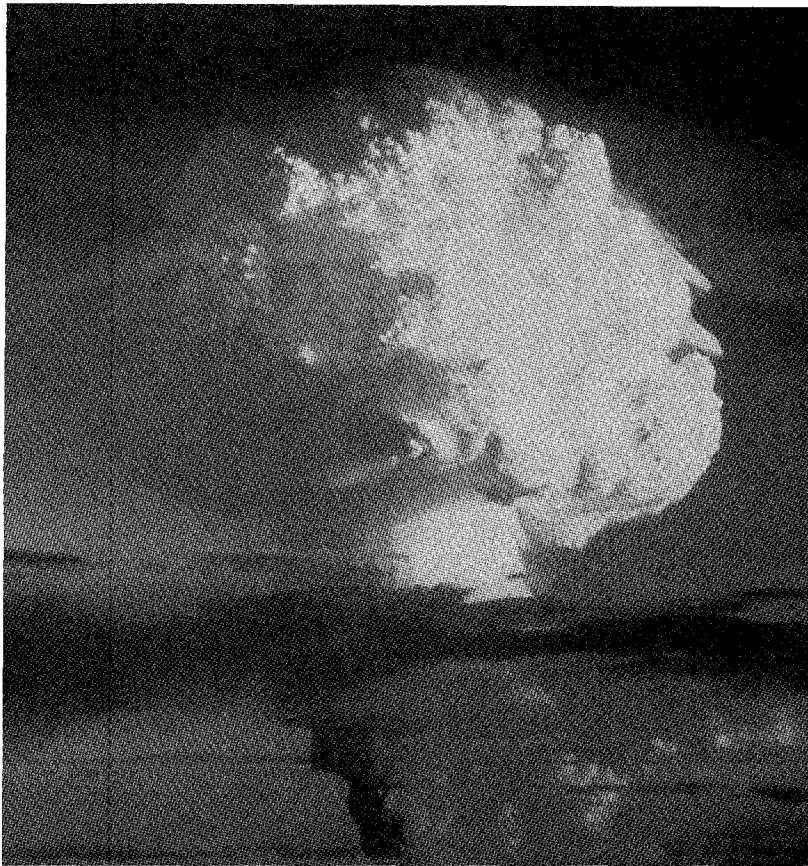
By Michael Karpin
Simon & Schuster, \$26.00

has written several books, including one on the murder of Yitzhak Rabin, has ventured into what remains largely forbidden territory in his own country. Mordechai Vanunu, a technician at Israel's once-secret Dimona nuclear weapons factory, was kidnapped in Italy in 1986 by Mossad (Israel's vaunted intelligence service) and ended up serving 18 years in jail for divulging nuclear secrets to the British *Sunday Times*. Based on a documentary he produced several years ago, Karpin's history relies heavily on interviews with many of the scientists and politicians, including Shimon Peres, who

were vital in creating an Israeli nuclear weapon. Karpin may not be the first to write about this topic, which was covered by Avner Cohen's scholarly *Israel and the Bomb* (1998), but he provides the most comprehensive and illuminating account of Israel's path and its policy of "strategic ambiguity" about nuclear weapons. Perhaps it is a sign of Israel's maturity as a state that it can now permit books like Karpin's to appear—though it appears censored. Or perhaps it is merely a useful way of reminding Israel's foes, (like Iran) about the apparent dimensions of its arsenal, which is said to include several hundred nuclear missiles, not to mention nuclear-armed submarines.

As Karpin correctly stresses, Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was the key to developing a bomb. On Dec. 21, 1960, he told the Israeli parliament in an emotional speech that Dimona existed and was "meant to be used only for peaceful purposes." The Holocaust loomed large in Israel's consciousness, and Ben-Gurion was convinced that possession of a bomb was central to avoiding a repetition of the slaughter of Jews. Ben-Gurion assembled a crack scientific team led by a brilliantly inventive German émigré named Ernst Bergmann who ran roughshod over bureaucratic obstacles. Karpin focuses on the tensions that threatened to derail the project before it had even gotten started. Some of Karpin's most interesting passages focus on the army's reluctance to develop a bomb, which it viewed as a costly and futile sideshow. The army leadership believed that Israel would be better off focusing on amassing more mundane weaponry. Ben-Gurion disagreed. He created a black budget for the bomb that would have sent his generals into conniptions had they only known about it. "Israel's nuclear project was run," says Karpin, "like a state within a state."

Karpin is also very good on the reciprocal advantages that Israel and France derived from cooperating with each other. Karpin rightly notes that Israel would never have been able to build a bomb without the assistance of the French. Shimon Peres, the young



head of the defense ministry who always fancied himself an intellectual savant, got on well with his French counterparts. For their part, the French were eager to have access to the Israeli scientific establishment in order to speed the process of constructing their own bomb. What's more, the French coveted intelligence on Algeria, where they were waging a bitter and ultimately disastrous war against Islamic militants. What Israel—or, more precisely, Ben-Gurion—wanted from the French was a nuclear reactor. In return for Israeli help in the 1956 Suez War, France agreed to cough one up. This was heady stuff for Israel, which was for the first time playing in the big leagues of great-power politics. On Oct. 29, 1956, Israel launched an assault on Egypt that triggered the Suez War. "By agreeing that Israel would take part in the Suez campaign," writes Karpin, "Ben-Gurion was taking a grave risk in view of the inevitably angry response of the Soviet Union and the likely displeasure of the United States." No matter. Ben-Gurion was prepared to pretty much sacrifice anything in order to get hold

of a nuclear bomb. Once Norway agreed in 1959 to sell heavy water to Israel, the course was clear.

The surprising, or perhaps not so surprising, thing is that it took the United States until 1960 to begin to comprehend that Israel really was building a bomb. The CIA report on the failure to identify the Dimona project earlier has a familiar ring. It said: "The general feeling that Israel could not achieve this capability without outside aid from the U.S. or its allies... led to the tendency to discount rumors of Israeli reactor construction and French collaboration in the nuclear weapons area." Interestingly, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser was fooled by the Israelis. He thought Israel was simply disseminating propaganda to make itself seem more powerful than it actually was. It's important to remember that, in the 1960s, the notion of a small state like Israel constructing a bomb did seem improbable.

Shortly after becoming president, John F. Kennedy successfully pressured Ben-Gurion into allowing a team of Americans to inspect

Dimona, but they saw what they wanted to see, being unable to find any evidence that it was other than a peaceful project. Richard M. Nixon cut a deal with Golda Meir in which Israel agreed to forego the idea of public testing in exchange for American acquiescence and an end to inspections. Anyway, the United States wasn't that interested in harassing Israel publicly. Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol came up with the Delphic formulation "Israel will not be the first to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East" to satisfy the Americans. It didn't take much. Once the Middle East became the cockpit of superpower tensions, the United States became Israel's staunch backer and had little interest in subjecting it to international inspections.

Karpin doesn't speculate about it, but the Israeli example must have emboldened other powers to go down the same path. Status quo powers like Saudi Arabia don't need an atomic bomb—at least not until the Iranians procure one. Karpin suggests that Israel might take out—as it did in 1983 Saddam Hussein's nascent project—Iran's effort at constructing a bomb. But exactly how this would occur, he does not say. An attack that failed to take out the Iranian reactor would be worse than not attacking. And thanks to the Bush administration's maladroitness handling of the run-up to the Iraq war, not to mention the aftermath, it was harder than ever to assemble an international coalition that might be able to exert any pressure on Tehran.

Karpin is undaunted. He ends with an effusion about how a nuclear-free Middle East might look. But this is pious nonsense. His book offers scant room for optimism. Israel conducted its search for a nuclear bomb with restraint and diplomatic dexterity. The bluff and bombast emanating from the lunatics in Tehran could not be further removed from Israel's emphasis on nuclear weapons as a last resort. Israel has always understood something that Iran does not: how to keep a secret secret.

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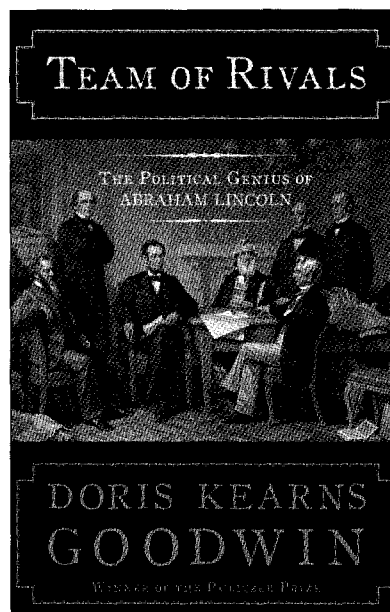
He Felt Thy Pain

Empathy was Lincoln's secret political weapon.

By William Lee Miller

We Americans somehow manage to make a maximum hero out of Abraham Lincoln, a politician if there ever was one, at the same time we hold a heavy negative stereotype of “politicians” and “politics.” In the immense popular legend that Lincoln has become, and in the endless outpouring of books, his life story and his personality often seem to upstage and obscure the “political” accomplishment that made his life story worth telling and his personality worth examining. We tend to lose the political forest for the biographical log cabins.

Doris Kearns Goodwin, the accomplished biographer of 20th-century presidents, has found a way to put the political “genius”—to use her term—back at the center of the story of this great 19th-century president. In her extraordinary new book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, she does this by embedding Lincoln in a nest of other politicians. She not only tells Lincoln's story, but also interweaves it with the story of the three other top candidates for the Republican nomination in 1860, whom Lincoln, in a striking act of self-confidence and magnanimity, took into his cabinet. They are, first, William Seward, who had been expected to win the Republican nomination and who went on to become



Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln

By Doris Kearns Goodwin

Simon & Schuster, \$35.00

secretary of state and Lincoln's closest adviser and friend (Goodwin, whose research and book notes are formidable, makes good use of the thousands of letters exchanged between Seward and his abolitionist wife Frances home in Auburn); second, the righteous, able, but egocentric abolitionist Salmon Chase who, although itching to be president, served well as Lincoln's secretary of the treasury (Goodwin also makes good use of the letters between Chase

and his lovely and devoted daughter Kate, who became an ambitious Washington hostess and rival to Mary Lincoln); and finally, the least known of the four, the uxorious Edward Bates, the Missouri conservative who became Lincoln's attorney general and furnishes this story with some domestic bliss and a “charming diary.”

The popular image of the legendary figure Abraham Lincoln is afflicted with an ahistorical and unpolitical perfectionism, both among those who celebrate him and those who, in disillusioned rebound from the myth, debunk him. The task of a serious writer addressing a general audience is to cut through this and show a real human being making decisions within the limits of a particular time and place and in a distinct role. Goodwin's device proves to be a particularly effective way of doing that, not by general historical description but by parallel biography. These “rivals” provide benchmarks by which Lincoln's responses to events may be measured.

Goodwin gives a particularly strong account of the contest for the Republican nomination in 1860. Lincoln did not win solely by luck, he won also by political shrewdness and by careful cultivation of a reputation as the ablest spokesman for the center of the Republican Party. Meanwhile the other three were each making characteristic costly errors: Seward overconfident, Chase self-deceiving, Bates unsure of his touch. Before Lincoln was perceived to be a candidate for the nomination, he skillfully concealed his cautious, growing hopes; deflected explicit support while speaking with “well-modulated enthusiasm” about other candidates; encouraged his representative to press the selection of Chicago as the site for the convention (since his name was not yet prominently mentioned, that city could be presented as a neutral site); and quietly encouraged delegates to regard him as their second choice should their first falter.

And he accepted an invitation to speak to the “Mental Culture” of New York at Cooper's Union. Political “genius” includes not only skillful maneuvering in the world of power,