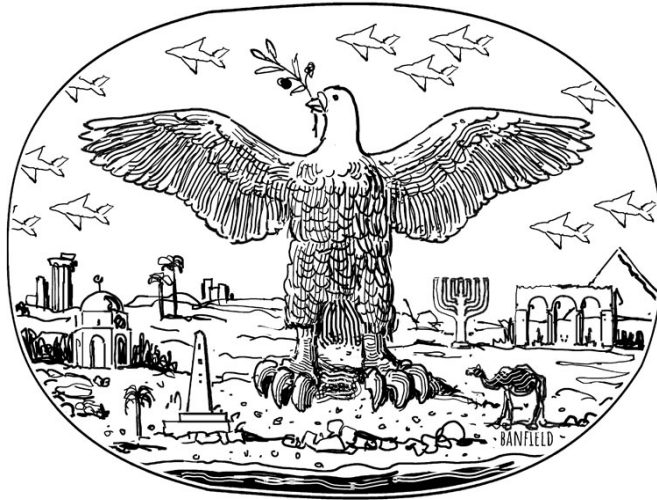


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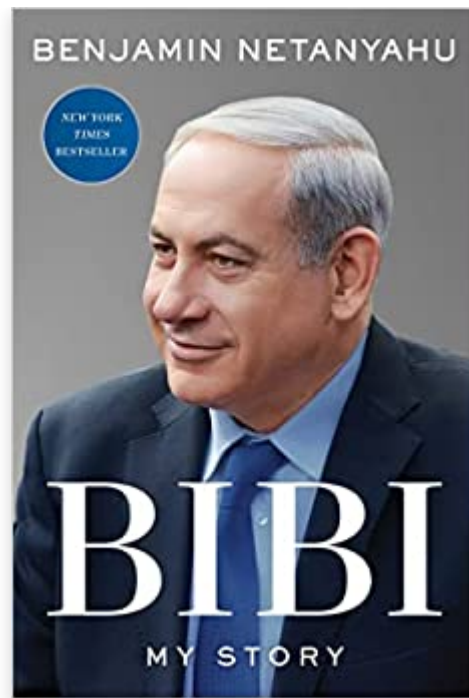
THE CHURCHILL OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Benjamin Netanyahu's autobiography is one of history's great Zionist texts.

by Andrew Roberts



REVIEWED

*Bibi: My Story*

MOST POLITICIANS' AUTOBIOGRAPHIES ARE TURGID AFFAIRS. THEY TEND TO BE written for the historical record, or for votes in the next election, or to prove that the author was always right about everything—three reliable avenues to literary failure. Because very often the authors' successes were won as the result of negotiation and compromises in anonymous committee rooms and dingy back offices, their memoirs struggle to convey drama: long speeches are reproduced; debates over long-dead issues are reheated; readers yawn.

Then there is Benjamin Netanyahu's autobiography, *Bibi: My Story*, which, as I realized around page 200, is not a politician's autobiography at all, but an adventure story dressed up as one. It is a Tom Clancy novel written for a Tom Cruise movie adaptation, *posing* as a normal politician's memoir. Yes, it has the photo of the author on the front cover and the requisite subtitle and the necessary width of a political memoir, but inside it is entirely different. Besides being a blood-and-guts page-turner more reminiscent of a film script than of the memoirs of Israel's longest-serving prime minister, it also deserves a place as one of history's great Zionist texts.

The book opens at Lod Airport near Tel Aviv in May 1972, where 94 passengers of a Sabena civilian aircraft have been hijacked by Black September terrorists. There had been no fewer

than 326 hijacking attempts since 1968, and the civilized world was finally about to fight back. The elite Israeli special forces unit Sayeret Matkal—universally known as “the Unit”—stormed the plane disguised as mechanics, shooting the terrorists with Berettas and freeing the hostages. The reader’s adrenaline rises as the account charges forward, with short paragraphs and no flummery. When the author is shot in the arm he explains, “I felt as if I’d been hit with a sledgehammer.” The book then continues at this Jack Ryan pace, unputdownable, for several hundred more pages.

The fact that Netanyahu wrote the book himself and in longhand, sometimes during budget debates and while on the road electioneering, explains its immediacy. Political memoirs that are ghostwritten or, even worse, written by committee, are unreadable. By total contrast, this one feels as if it has hardly been edited and comes straight from the author’s blue felt-tip pen. (Tony Blair also wrote his own memoirs longhand, which explains why his are the best British prime minister memoirs of the postwar period.) Netanyahu despises words such as “paradigm” and “parameter” and what he calls “imprecise patter,” and it shows in a book that doesn’t feature a single imprecise sentence.

When he was asked in 2011 how he wanted to be remembered, Netanyahu replied, “That I helped secure the life of the Jewish state and its future.” This book explains how he achieved that, but a surprising aspect of it—again, so unlike most political memoirs—is that much of the book is not really about himself, but about two other people who define him. It doesn’t take a psychologist to work out the essential truth about what drives Netanyahu: despite his achievements and longevity in office in the infamously tough bearpit of Israeli politics, he considers himself to be only the third most impressive member of his immediate family. For here is a man who is acutely conscious of having constantly to live up to the extremely high expectations of his father, Benzion, and brother Jonathan “Yoni” Netanyahu. Since both are dead, they cannot tell him whether he has succeeded or not.

Benjamin Disraeli once said that he had been born in a library, and in a sense the same is true of his Netanyahu namesake. Professor Benzion Netanyahu was an eccentric, immensely learned intellectual who edited the *Encyclopaedia Hebraica* and was the foremost historian of the Jews in Spain. His son’s stories of his absent-mindedness make him an endearing figure, but the greatest effect he had on the future premier was in his politics, for he had been an admirer of Theodor Herzl and personal secretary to Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionist Zionist movement. The essential precepts of Revisionist Zionism—primarily the

assertive self-sufficiency of the Jewish people in pursuit of their rightful historical homeland—are the lights that guide Benjamin Netanyahu to this day. Benzion was one of Jabotinsky's pallbearers, so there is a direct apostolic succession from the founder of Revisionist Zionism to its present-day follower.

It is very clear from this book that the thoughts, hopes, fears, and dreams of Benzion Netanyahu pulsate through his son constantly, and form the bedrock of his beliefs. The last time that I have encountered such filial piety in a book was in Winston Churchill's two-volume biography of his father, Lord Randolph Churchill, who arguably did not deserve it, having been a beast to his son. By contrast, Benjamin Netanyahu's devotion to his father was built on mutual love, admiration, and affection. Winston Churchill spent a lifetime trying to win the approval of his long-dead father, who had died at 45; Benjamin Netanyahu was more fortunate because Benzion lived to 102 and was therefore able to bestow approval on his son, although it came with severe admonitions to protect Zion from the Iranian nuclear threat.

Benjamin Netanyahu inherited the nickname "Bibi" from a cousin who was one of Israel's first air force pilots; it is used by friends and foes alike. The middle brother of three, he was also known in his family as "Akshan"—"the stubborn one"—a characteristic similarly noted by admirers and detractors. Although he is friendly and admiring toward his younger brother, Iddo—an academic and playwright who also served in the Unit—it is elder brother Yoni whom Bibi idolizes on a par with his father. "For my younger brother and me he was our North Star," Bibi writes, "guiding us through life's labyrinthine paths and serving as a model to be emulated."

The chapter of the book in which Yoni is killed leading the near-miraculous Entebbe raid on July 4, 1976 (an operation in which Israeli commandos dropped into Uganda's biggest airport at night to rescue another planeload of hostages from Palestinian hijackers), is truly enthralling. Handsome, brave, charismatic, highly intelligent, and literary, Yoni Netanyahu won the Medal of Valor for heroism in the Yom Kippur War and remains the very *beau idéal* of manhood for a generation of Israelis today. His death at the moment of total victory at Entebbe is the Israeli equivalent of Admiral Horatio Nelson being killed at the battle of Trafalgar.

For Bibi, Yoni represents the perfect personification of the chivalric Renaissance gentleman-warrior, and it is abundantly clear that he daily strives to win the approval of his now long-dead brother. The fact that it cannot be bestowed in no way lessens the drive. That dynamic is

central to this book, although the author himself seems unaware of it, or at least does not acknowledge it. The Churchill of the modern Middle East thus shares the psychological makeup of the real Winston Churchill, except in Bibi's case he has two family members to strive to impress and emulate, rather than just one.

Although Bibi had hardly a word of English up to the age of eight, by twelve he was elected class president in his American high school. (His family lived in the U.S. for a stint in the 1950s and again in the '60s while Bibi's father taught at Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning in Philadelphia.) "It was, I remember, astonishingly easy to get elected," he writes. "All you had to do was to be nice to everyone." He thereafter "devoured Machiavelli," something that not every politician would have admitted in their memoirs, and was taught how to fire an Uzi submachine gun by Yoni while still at school. Yet it was not at school or his subsequent time at MIT where his character was formed, but in the Unit, where "stragglers weren't tolerated." It was there that he came to recognize the importance of teamwork—there was a squad called "Team Bibi"—but also of self-discipline, courage, and the self-confidence that derives from being a member of an elite. On the negative side of the equation is his chronic back pain, the result of having to carry 130-pound backpacks for miles during training and maneuvers, and the fact that even today, at 73, he finds it hard to sleep with anything covering his arms because of the Unit's training to be able to reach his rifle instantaneously.

Although the details of operations are necessarily still secret, it soon becomes clear that Bibi had some hair-raising moments serving in the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), ones that cannot but have shaped his personality. He was attacked by giant cockroaches in a cave in the Negev Desert, very nearly drowned in the Suez Canal, blew up Lebanese planes on the tarmac of Beirut's airport, had a comrade die in his arms, survived two serious car crashes, led Team Bibi through what he believed was a minefield, and was bitten on the neck by a scorpion. On an occasion when he nearly died of hypothermia on Mount Hebron, he writes: "If anyone was silly enough to urinate while climbing, that extremity would freeze as well!" In all the operations he himself commanded, however, he never lost a man. What he learned from all these adventures was that "[t]he distance from triumph to tragedy was often only a few centimeters wide."

As is often the case when soldiers turn into politicians, his experiences made him reluctant to resort to military solutions except as a last resort. The comrade who had died in his arms was called David, and he recalls how, "[w]hen as prime minister I sent men into battle, I would always think of David's mother and the other mothers of Israelis grieving for their fallen sons."

It hasn't of course prevented him from adopting the military resort several times in his long career, and one suspects now that he has become prime minister yet again there could be more such occasions. But no one reading this memoir will believe that he is the gung-ho warmonger of his opponents' demonology.

There are a number of good jokes in this book—one footnote points out that Bibi's grandfather Benjamin "Simon" Segal was "no relation to the infamous Benjamin 'Bugsy' Siegel"—but also many moving passages. "Time and again we had come back from the dead," Netanyahu writes of the Jewish people,

most recently from the worst horror ever inflicted on any people. I was part of the new generation of Jewish children coming into its own in the Jewish state a mere few years after the slaughter of a million and a half Jewish children in the Holocaust. This was anything but normal. It was miraculous.

It was Bibi's period at MIT from 1972 to 1976 that turned him into a free marketeer. He approached economics not from a philosophical, or even political, point of view, but through the prism that his father had always emphasised: Zionism. In order for Israel to be strong enough to survive in a region packed with mortal enemies, she needed a large and well-equipped army, the huge expense of which had to be borne by Israel's then sclerotic socialist economy. At MIT, Bibi learned how "military intelligence, academia, and business clustered together and working in tandem" might provide the wherewithal for a strong IDF.

For Israel's never-ending existential crisis, Bibi reckoned, a strong economy was a precondition for survival, and he became convinced at much the same time as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher—both of whom he later met—that free-market economics were key to turbo-charging Western economies. "You couldn't have effective defence without unleashing individual initiative," Netanyahu told Peter Robinson on the Hoover Institution's *Uncommon Knowledge* program while publicizing this book.

Bibi's struggle as finance minister between 2003 and 2005 to deregulate and privatize the Israeli economy took place against forces well entrenched in Israel's civil service, trade unions,

academia, and Knesset, but employing his high-school knowledge of Machiavellian political skills, tremendous powers of oratory, knowledge gleaned from reading free-market thinkers, and a belief in the Laffer Curve, he pulled off a transformation in the Israeli economy.

Economic success transformed the fortunes of the Likud Party, to the extent that Bibi is presently the longest-serving leader of any democratic country in the world for the past 58 years. Even though he was first elected when Bill Clinton was in the White House, Bibi became prime minister again on December 29 last year. Even his political opponents' attempts to mire him in legal battles over alleged corruption failed to prevent the Israelis from reelecting him to an unprecedented sixth term as prime minister.

In a passage that Iran's rulers ought to take to heart, Bibi criticizes Golda Meir for not preempting the Arab attacks on Israel in the Yom Kippur War, in the same way that had happened in the Six Day War seven years previously. "Pre-emptive action is always a difficult decision for political leaders because they can never probe what would have happened if they hadn't preempted," he writes. "Nevertheless, faced with a life-threatening challenge, Israel should always put its security first and when necessary—strike first. The alliance with the US will take care of itself." He adds, I hope correctly, that "[m]ost Americans, including their presidents, understand that when push comes to shove, Israel must do what is necessary to defend itself."

"We are a people of hope," writes Bibi.

Our national anthem, Hatikva, means hope. Without hope we would never have been able to rise from the ashes of the Holocaust and re-establish the Jewish state.... The real foundation of peace in our area is hope that derives from strength, and the consequent realization by our neighbours that Israel is here to stay.

The endpapers show a map of all of the four Arab countries that signed the Abraham Accords in 2020, which finally, after three quarters of a century of Israel's existence, did reflect a realization by at least some of Israel's neighbors that she was there to stay. Saudi Arabia even allows commercial overflights to and from Israel.

This book is packed with good throwaway lines, such as this one about how to perform well on television shows such as *Nightline*: “TV favors cool over hot.” Israel’s Iron Dome defense weapon is described as “a bullet hitting a bullet in the sky.” Overall, however, it is the superb Zionist one-liners that will come to be featured in future editions of the *Oxford Book of Quotations*. Thus, when Palestinians and their apologists complain about the Nakba refugee “catastrophe” of 1948, Bibi writes, “There wasn’t a single Arab refugee when six Arab armies set out to destroy fledgling Israel at its birth.” A short historical interlude covering three millennia proves how “[t]he Jews are the original natives, the Arabs the colonists.” He describes terrorism as: “Just totalitarianism reborn, metastasizing. The terrorists neutered man’s sense of sin,” and argues that “[t]heir choice of means reveal what their true aims are,” meaning further genocide. His prescription for speaking at the United Nations is to “[b]e concise, avoid jargon, forget diplomatic niceties, refer to broader interests, make one main point.”

All five of those practices are present in this memoir, and the main point he makes is that in seeking to weaken Israel and force it to make peace with the Palestinians, the world has been pursuing an entirely wrong agenda, for only a supremely strong Israel can do that. “The road to a broader Middle East peace between Israel and the Arab world did not go *through* the Palestinian seat of government in Ramallah. It went *around* it.” Only when the Palestinians themselves recognize this can there be a genuine and durable peace. “Palestinian politics are hopelessly mired in their extremist fantasy of annihilation,” Bibi writes. “And there is always a Palestinian faction to out-Hamas Hamas.” The Abraham Accords prove that four Arab countries finally appreciate this.

As in any political memoir, there is a certain amount of point-scoring and score-settling in this book, but considering the avalanche of contumely that has been directed at its author over the decades, it is not excessive. Bibi was once accused of being a CIA agent code-named “John Sullivan” because his U.S. social security number was registered in that name rather than under Benjamin Netanyahu. It was not until after weeks of accusations that an enterprising journalist finally proved it had been a bureaucratic mix-up and tracked down the real John Sullivan, a retired mailman living in Vermont.

Although there are excellent pen portraits of Yitzhak Rabin, Ariel Sharon, Shimon Peres, Yitzhak Shamir, and several other Israeli politicians, Ehud Barak will not be happy with the way he is portrayed in relation to the Sabena operation at Lod Airport, as “a bystander. His only role in storming the plane was standing on the tarmac and blowing a whistle. Four of his

decorations were given not for leadership under fire but for intelligence gathering operations.”
Ouch!

Bibi: my story has inevitably drawn criticism, largely as a way of attacking Bibi himself. One reviewer described the West's longest-serving leader as having a “rather childish” view of the world; another accused him of McCarthyism for daring to criticize the *Economist* magazine; a third said that the book was “self-serving,” which is hardly unknown in memoirs. The review in the *Times Literary Supplement* highlighted Bibi's supposed “narcissism, suspiciousness, deep-seated pessimism and distinct lack of emotional generosity,” despite the fact that the exact opposite of each of these traits is prominently displayed in this book (except suspiciousness, which is a prerequisite in his job).

When reviewing a book of Yoni's posthumously published letters, Herman Wouk wrote, “The lands of the free shall need such men until the day when the last tyrannies that spawn the terrorists are faced down.” That day is clearly still a long way off, but Bibi Netanyahu is nobly carrying on his late brother's work, which would not have surprised Yoni, who predicted when Bibi was 18 that he would one day become prime minister of Israel. In his third speech to the U.S. Congress, in 2015, Bibi defiantly stated that, in relation to the Iranian nuclear threat, “Even if Israel has to stand alone, Israel will stand!” It was as pure a statement of Revisionist Zionism as can be imagined, and no one, not even his worst enemy, could be in any doubt of Bibi's complete sincerity. Benzion and Yoni Netanyahu would be proud.

Andrew Roberts is the author of several books, including, most recently, *Leadership in War: Essential Lessons from Those Who Made History* (Viking).

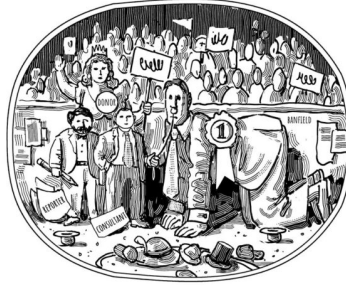
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GETTING THE CANDIDATE WE DESERVE

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