Lost Years
Bush, Sharon and Failure in the Middle East
by Mark Matthews

Reviewed by Martin Sherman
Tel Aviv University
Middle East Quarterly
Summer 2010

A quote that appears pages from the end reveals the mindset of the author of this disappointing, tedious book: "While refusing to recognize Israel. ... [Hamas's] early moves signaled pragmatism." That Matthews, who covered the Middle East for the Baltimore Sun, considers Hamas pragmatic while at the same time refusing to recognize Israel defines the prism of the entire book. It also accounts for the "lost years" of the title, implying that some dramatic opportunity was missed due to the obtuseness of the Israeli and U.S. leaders.

Matthews suggests that George W. Bush's "excessively" warm affinity for Israel, together with his administration's reluctance to pressure Israel into accepting Palestinian demands, resulted from an over-compensation for the trauma of electoral defeat suffered by his father, George H. W. Bush in 1992, a failure, Matthews implies, that resulted in large measure from a clash with the U.S. Jewish leadership. Thus, does he raise the specter of an all-powerful Jewish lobby: "The elder Bush, by coincidence, was the third president in recent years, following Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, who both clashed with Israel and failed to win reelection."

Matthews neglects to mention that Carter's reelection failure just may have been precipitated by the fiasco of the U.S. embassy takeover in Tehran and his less-than-competent handling of that crisis. Similarly, might Ford (who never having been actually elected, could not technically be re-elected) have failed in his bid to retain office largely due to the fact that he presided over what was described by contemporaries as "the worst economic times since the 1930s?" Or that Bush Sr. was generally seen as grossly mishandling the economy and alienating his traditional power base for reneging on his "read-my-lips" promise not to increase taxes?

The Lost Years regurgitates failed conventional wisdom regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The book embraces the false narrative regarding the Palestinians' political aspirations and the false symmetry behind continuing clashes, leaving the reader with the impression that measures undertaken by Israel to
defend itself and its citizens in fact constitute the major cause of Palestinian extremism.

In stark contrast to his preference for Israeli inertness in the realm of security, Matthews reveals a strong penchant for action, rather than prudence, in the political sphere. Failed initiatives from pre-Bush times are generally described in approving tones, basing this judgment on their declared intentions, however injudicious, rather than on their actual outcomes, however pernicious.

In his view, Israel ought to base its policy on the gestures and polished mannerisms of suave U.S.-educated Palestinian diplomats speaking in English rather than on the harsh realities it faced. If only Israel had thrown all caution to the wind and indulged in a giant leap of faith, an opportunity for peace might have been seized. Only by this contrived logic could an opportunity have been considered missed and the George W. Bush years "lost."