LEBANON: A POSTMORTEM ON U.S. POLICY*

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Now that the Reagan Administration's policy in Lebanon has clearly and tragically failed, it might be instructive and helpful for future direction to analyze that policy and the reasons for its failure.

Almost from the beginning, Ronald Reagan as President carried out policies based on his generalized ideological notions of world politics. In the Middle East, the Reagan White House viewed the Soviet Union as the main enemy and very naively assumed that any group or country in that region which disagreed with U.S. policies or actions was automatically Pro-Soviet or even that it was acting on behalf of the Soviets. From this perspective, therefore, the Syrians, the PLO and the Lebanese opposition groups were Soviet agents, whereas the Israelis and the Lebanese Forces, including the Phalangists were pro-American. This approach happened to suit the needs and orientations of the Begin government in Israel which had definite plans to destroy, or at least greatly weaken, the PLO in order to facilitate Israeli annexation of the West Bank and Gaza.

The Reagan Administration has often acted as if politics, diplomacy and negotiations are instruments of the weak. Instead, military solutions are favored such as in American dealings with the Lebanese crisis. In fact, one can say that, if politics is the art of the possible, the Reagan Presidency has not been engaged in a political process in Lebanon — but in visionary activity. Thus, the Israeli invasion was uncritically viewed as a major victory, not only for Israel but for pro-Western interests and factions generally. Consequently, several erroneous conclusions were drawn with almost

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disastrous results for the U.S. as well as the Middle East, especially Lebanon.

Briefly, Reagan and his foreign policy advisers concluded that, with the withdrawal of PLO forces, both the Palestinian and Lebanese problems were practically solved — and to the West’s satisfaction. A new and very pro-Western Lebanese president was elected, killed and quickly replaced by his brother, who was equally pro-Western. All the U.S. had to do, therefore, to reap the rewards of Israeli “victory” was to strengthen the new “Legitimate” government. To that end, the Reagan Administration initiated a massive and intensive campaign to train, arm and build a strong Lebanese army and provide great moral and material support for the new government. Including the stationing of some 1,600 marines as part of a multinational force orignially intended to facilitate PLO withdrawal and the protection of Palestinians in Lebanon. In return, the Lebanese government was requested to show its gratitude and demonstrate its pro-Western orientation by adhering to the May 17, 1983 Lebanese Israeli agreement for withdrawal of Israeli troops from Lebanon which was to presage removal of all foreign troops in the country. Both the U.S. and Israel looked forward to the day, in the near future, when Lebanon would be securely in the Western camp and a peace treaty is signed with Israel.

It did not work out that way at all. In fact, this policy was bound to fail because both the Reagan and Begin governments woefully misread the Lebanese situation. First and foremost, the Lebanese conflict was not mainly the result of outside interefrence and Palestinian activity but rather a civil was occasioned by real grievances on the part of a major but under-represented and even disfranchised sector of the population. This civil war was exacerbated by many factors and outside forces, only one of which was the Palestinian presence. Therefore, the weakening or removal of the PLO could not and did not solve the problem as the US hoped and assumed. Furthermore, the Israeli invasion might have weakened