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THE MAKING OF A TRAGEDY:
AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN LEBANON, 1982-1984

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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David S. McCarthy
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Master of Arts

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For My Mom And Dad
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This project began as a research seminar paper under the direction of Professor Phillips during the 2001 fall semester. As I struggled to incorporate that paper into my master's thesis, her comments and advice were invaluable. Professor Crapol has provided tremendous support from the outset. He encouraged me to pursue this topic despite my own doubts, and he carefully read through preliminary drafts of the entire thesis. In addition, his seminar on American foreign relations during the Cold War broadened my understanding of key historiographical debates in the secondary literature. Professor Rafeq offered numerous suggestions during the final stages of the project that made it easier for me to understand the various factions within Lebanon.

At the end of May, I spent three days at the Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California. I would like to thank the staff there for all of their assistance. Although much of the material on Lebanon remains classified, the librarians at the Reagan Library showed me what was available in their collection and explained how to file Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

I also want to thank the staff of the inter-library loan office at the College of William and Mary. According to my records, I filed over thirty requests in the course of my research. They quickly tracked down the material that I needed, and they always notified me once everything had arrived. I am grateful for all of their support.
ABSTRACT

In the late summer of 1982, the United States government sent a contingent of Marines to Lebanon to participate in a multinational peacekeeping mission that included forces from France, Italy, and, eventually, Great Britain. American intervention in Lebanon, which lasted for eighteen months, is most often remembered for the suicide bombing of the Marine barracks on October 23, 1983 that killed 241 Americans.

This thesis attempts to place what happened on October 23 in the larger context of American involvement in Lebanon. Despite the contentions of some authors, the bombing was not an inexplicable aberration. American forces were under siege long before the incident, but the Reagan administration repeatedly ignored the dangers confronting them. From the outset, American objectives in Lebanon were not clearly defined. President Ronald Reagan and his advisers wanted to stabilize the Lebanese government while orchestrating the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the country. They unrealistically believed that a contingent of 1,200 Marines would facilitate these policies.

Rather than helping the United States government in the region, the presence of the Marines in Beirut became a liability. The administration claimed that the Americans were neutral peacekeepers, but in reality, they provided direct support to the government of Lebanon, arming and training soldiers loyal to President Amin Gemayel. In the fall of 1983, American ships even began to fire on targets that purportedly threatened the Lebanese Armed Forces.

American intervention in Lebanon between 1982 and 1984 was truly one of worst debacles in the history of American foreign relations. An examination of American policy during this time will hopefully contribute to a more complete understanding of the tragedy that unfolded on October 23.
THE MAKING OF A TRAGEDY:
AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN LEBANON, 1982-1984

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Introduction: One Bloody Sunday In Beirut

In the late summer of 1982, the United States government sent a contingent of Marines to Lebanon to participate in a multinational peacekeeping mission that included forces from France, Italy, and, eventually, Great Britain. American intervention in Lebanon, which lasted for eighteen months, is most often remembered for the attack on the Marine compound at Beirut International Airport. Shortly after 6:20 in the morning on October 23, 1983, a yellow Mercedes truck entered the parking lot on the southern side of the Battalion Landing Team Headquarters. The driver of the truck circled the lot, gunned the engine, and accelerated towards the building where approximately 350 Marines were sleeping. The truck rolled over wire fences and swerved around several defensive barriers before ramming into the building's lobby. As he took cover, Lance Corporal Eddie DiFranco, one of the few surviving witnesses, managed to get a brief glimpse of the driver. "He looked right at me . . . smiled, that's it . . . Soon as I saw [the truck] over here, I knew what was going to happen," he later reported.¹ Less than a minute later, another suicide bomber demolished the French barracks in Beirut. The second attack killed 58

French paratroopers. The subsequent FBI investigation revealed that the bomb at the American barracks contained twelve thousand pounds of explosives, which made it possible to rip the entire four-story concrete structure off its foundation.

Initial reports placed the American death toll at 161, but that number would eventually rise to 241. Those who survived the attack will always remember what happened on that Sunday morning in Beirut. "As soon as we got up," recalled Lance Corporal Robert Calhoun, "you heard [what seemed to be] about a thousand people screaming, 'Help me. God help me.'" Lance Corporal Michael Petit, who had been sleeping in a building just north of the compound on October 23, vividly described the horrible scenes that followed the explosion: " Everywhere I looked I saw bodies sprawled in gruesome positions. One Marine, still in his sleeping bag, hung from a tree. The decapitated body of another was under a jeep, his arms twisted at an impossible angle. The legs of yet another jutted from beneath a huge slab of concrete . . . . That was the most devastating moment of my life." In addition to those killed in action, over a hundred Americans were injured in the attack. Lieutenant Colonel Howard Gerlach survived, but he could no longer move his arms or legs. After coming out of a coma, Gerlach asked his wife what had happened to his immediate subordinates and learned that they were all dead.5

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3 Calhoun quoted in Wright, 70.
5 Martin and Walcott, 128.
In writing about his experiences in Beirut, Petit concludes that “it grows increasingly unlikely [with the passage of time] that anyone will ever be able to entirely identify the motives behind the conflict.” There is considerable truth to this statement, but in a larger sense, of course, it is the obligation of historians to ascertain these motives. Understanding Lebanon is by no means an easy task. The following analysis attempts to place the barracks bombing in the larger context of American involvement in Lebanon. More than anything else, my objective is to dismiss the argument that October 23 was somehow an aberration. According to military historian Eric Hammel, the attack “was an incident that had very little to do with and was wholly apart from the actual fact of our ‘presence’ in Lebanon or, indeed, of the Lebanese civil war. Rather, I believe, the bombing was the direct outgrowth of our leaders’ having made available a target of unprecedented magnitude in the center of a chaotic situation.” From Hammel’s perspective, in other words, the tragedy resulted from faulty military decisionmaking. If the Marines had been more widely dispersed on the ground, the tragedy could have been averted. This type of reasoning, however, obscures the reality of the situation in Beirut. In truth, the Marines had been moved to a central location in order to better protect them from snipers and mortar rounds. American forces were under siege long before October 23, but the Reagan administration repeatedly ignored the dangers confronting them.

General John W. Vessey, Jr., the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

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6 Petit, ix.
under Reagan, has explained that the fundamental flaw of American intervention in Lebanon was the idea "that things were going to get better." Many observers have noted that Lebanon was the Vietnam of the 1980s. This description is intriguing in many ways, but it is also somewhat misleading. Contrary to the declarations of the Reagan administration after the barracks bombing, the Marines had initially entered the country for reasons not directly related to the Cold War. The Soviet Union became an issue only when Reagan was compelled to defend the peacekeeping mission against its opponents. Moreover, most American soldiers in Vietnam at least had a basic understanding of their objectives. In Lebanon, on the other hand, the Marines had widely disparate interpretations of the reasons for their deployment. When journalist Thomas L. Friedman asked the final contingent of Marines leaving Beirut in 1984 to describe the mission that they had been sent to perform, he received a variety of responses. Some reported that they were guarding the Beirut International Airport. One Marine claimed that the objective was to bring religious freedom to the people of Lebanon. Yet the most honest and direct response came from Sergeant Jeffery Roberts: "The mission turned out to be a lot more than it was originally supposed to be. It got so big and broad it sort of sucked up everything. People asked me why I was here. I really can't tell them. It was just to be here. It was a political thing." 

The failure of American intervention in Lebanon can be attributed to many

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factors. Since its inception in September 1982, the mission lacked clarity and direction. In the words of Colin Powell, who served as the military aide to Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, "Beirut wasn’t sensible and never did serve a purpose. It was goofy from the beginning."\textsuperscript{10} The Reagan administration publicly described the Marine contingent as a neutral peacekeeping force. In reality, however, the Marines provided support to the government of Lebanon, arming and training soldiers loyal to President Amin Gemayel. The United States became increasingly supportive of the Gemayel government, and in the fall of 1983, the navy fired on Suq-al-Gharb in order to defend the Lebanese Armed Forces against the Druze militia. The Pentagon commission that investigated the barracks bombing found considerable disagreement over the relationship between the decision to shell Suq-al-Gharb and October 23. While some officials believed that they were unrelated, the Pentagon investigation revealed that "[t]he prevalent view within the USCINCEUR [Commander-in-Chief, Europe] chain of command, however, is that there was some linkage between the two events."\textsuperscript{11}

Historians will never know for sure what motivated the attacks on the French and American forces in Lebanon. In the aftermath of the bombings, intelligence reports implicated both Iran and Syria. Defenders of Reagan’s foreign policy argue that October 23 was orchestrated by Iranian terrorists with a long-standing grudge against the United States. It is entirely likely that the suicide attackers received assistance from radical groups in Iran and Syria, but in

\textsuperscript{10} Powell quoted in Cannon, 354.
\textsuperscript{11} Report Of The DOD Commission, 42.
the final analysis, they needed to have support within Lebanon in order to successfully execute their mission. What happened on that gruesome Sunday morning in Beirut was much more than an extension of the Iranian Revolution; it was an attempt to permanently drive the United States out of Lebanon.

The tragedy of American involvement in Lebanon is that one truck bomb completely reversed foreign policy. After the deadly explosion, Reagan declared that the continued presence of the Marines was "central to our credibility on a global scale."\textsuperscript{12} He repeatedly invoked the specter of communism in the following months to justify the peacekeeping mission. If the Gemayel government collapsed, he reasoned, Lebanon would certainly fall under the influence of Syria, which received backing from the Soviet Union. A communist dominated Lebanon would not only threaten Israel but the entire Middle East. At the beginning of February 1984, however, Reagan and his top advisers made the decision to withdraw from Lebanon. Abandoning the peacekeeping mission did not give rise to Soviet domination of the Middle East, and ironically, Syrian soldiers have remained in Lebanon to the present day.

By any standard of measurement, Lebanon is truly one of the worst debacles in the history of American foreign relations. According to Reagan biographer Lou Cannon, "[t]he story of the Reagan administration's involvement in Lebanon is a case study of foreign policy calamity."\textsuperscript{13} Perhaps the greatest tragedy of American intervention was that it exacerbated the problem of Middle Eastern terrorism. Many observers have depicted October 23 as the


\textsuperscript{13} Cannon, 340.
tragic ending of a misguided venture into a foreign land, but in many ways, the incident was only the beginning. In a recent PBS interview, Robert McFarlane, Reagan’s National Security Adviser at the time of the barracks bombing, made the following observation about terrorism during the Reagan presidency: “[terrorists] learned that the American people can be traumatized by terrorism, that it can create pressure on the government, and that our government’s response in the 1980s tended to be rather conventional and heavy-handed.” 14 In the case of Lebanon, terrorist groups discovered that they had more control over American foreign policy than they had previously imagined.

* * *

C. Vann Woodward long ago warned about “[t]he twilight zone that lies between living memory and written history.” 15 So far, Lebanon has received surprisingly little attention from historians, and as a result, I am fully aware of the dangers presented by the so-called twilight zone. Since a substantial portion of the documents pertaining to American intervention in Lebanon remain classified, I have relied extensively on newspaper articles and memoirs when piecing together my narrative. I supplemented these sources with unpublished Ph.D. dissertations, journal articles, and monographs. During the early stages of this project, for instance, George Ball’s assessment of American policy in Lebanon was particularly helpful.

I have attempted to make the most of the sources that I found, but it is

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important to keep in mind that definitive conclusions cannot be formulated until more government documents are de-classified. Hopefully, this thesis will be a helpful starting point for researchers who come after me. The first chapter examines how the United States became involved in Lebanon during the summer of 1982, and it traces the evolution of Reagan’s policies through the bombing of the American embassy in Beirut in April 1983. The second chapter begins with the May 17 agreement and ends with the withdrawal of American forces in 1984.
Chapter 1: “No Reverse Gear”

Lebanon is a quagmire. Anyone there will get drawn deeper and deeper into the engulfing morass.--Yitzhak Rabin

If President Ronald Reagan and his administration had responded more decisively during the summer of 1982, American intervention in Lebanon would have been unnecessary. Secretary of State Alexander Haig’s sympathy for Israel clouded his judgment, and although it is unclear whether he provided direct approval for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon on June 6, he certainly could have done more to prevent the attack. On the day after Anwar Sadat’s funeral in October 1981, Haig had spoken with Prime Minister Menachem Begin in Egypt. According to Haig’s account of this meeting, Begin informed him that Israel was planning a military operation against targets associated with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon. Haig told Begin that the United States could not support the plan. “If you move, you move alone,” he reportedly said. “Unless there is a major, internationally recognized provocation, the United States will not support such an action.” But when Begin pushed him on the matter, promising that the incursion would be relatively minor, Haig’s response was much more ambiguous. He said that the proposal might be sensible from an Israeli perspective, but he reminded Begin that “Israel will be alone if it carries out such a plan.”

In the months that followed Haig’s encounter with Begin, Israel continued

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1 Rabin quoted in George P. Shultz, Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993) 233.
3 Ibid., 327.
to develop plans for an invasion of Lebanon. General Ariel Sharon, Israel's Defense Minister, even shared these proposals with State Department officials while visiting the United States. Sharon said that Israel was considering two possible strategies. While the first would simply eradicate the PLO in southern Lebanon, the second entailed a full-scale offensive that would unite the Israelis and the Christian Phalange in Beirut. Haig immediately recognized the gravity of the situation. "It was clear that Sharon was putting the United States on notice: one more provocation by the Palestinians and Israel would deliver a knockout blow to the PLO," he later recalled.4 Haig told Sharon that the United States could not sanction the invasion unless it was for the purpose of self-defense. As George Ball has pointed out, however, Haig could have threatened to withhold military funding from Israel in order to deter Sharon's hawkish tendencies.5 In the spring of 1982, the Reagan administration allowed Israel to give orders to the United States. The situation required decisive action, but the responses emanating from the White House reflected a shocking level of hesitancy. Sharon haughtily declared to Haig that "[n]o one has the right to tell Israel what decision it should take in defense of its people."6 Rather than standing his ground and reminding Sharon that Israel's strength was dependent on continued American assistance, Haig yielded to Sharon's intimidation tactics.

Israel finally had a reason to execute their war plans when terrorists shot Israeli Ambassador Shlomo Argov in London on June 3, 1982. Ironically, the

4 Ibid., 335.
5 George W. Ball, Error and Betrayal in Lebanon: An Analysis of Israel's Invasion of Lebanon and the Implications for U.S.-Israeli Relations (Washington, D.C.: Foundation For Middle East Peace, 1984), 35.
6 Haig, 335.
group responsible for the attempted assassination opposed the leadership of Yasser Arafat, but the Israelis were unconcerned with the distinction. The following day Israel launched an air strike against a stadium in Beirut where the PLO stored weapons. When the PLO opened fire on settlements in northern Israel to retaliate, they played directly into the hands of Begin and Sharon. On the morning of June 6, three divisions of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) attacked Lebanon. Contrary to the expectations of many experts, however, Israel did not restrict "Operation Peace For Galilee" to PLO targets in southern Lebanon. The IDF quickly established air supremacy, but despite their initial gains, they were unable to capture the strategic Beirut-Damascus Highway. The Israelis engaged Syrian forces, pushed northward, and surrounded Beirut by the middle of June. Rather than directly attacking Beirut, Sharon decided to bombard the city. The IDF cut off the city's supply of water and electricity, extensively bombed West Beirut from June to August, and repeatedly broke cease fires. During the final phase of the bombardment, Israel intentionally targeted residential and commercial areas, and over 90% of the casualties that resulted were non-combatants.

President Reagan reacted slowly to Israel's protracted siege of Beirut. At the beginning of August, the United Nations ordered a cease-fire, which the United States supported. But when Israel ignored the resolution, the Reagan

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7 Ball, 36.
administration seemed reluctant to alienate Begin. After Israel assented to a peace agreement on August 11 that had been arranged by Ambassador Philip Habib, the United States special envoy to the Middle East, Sharon responded on the next day with an eleven hour air campaign that killed an estimated three hundred people. Sharon’s defiance led Reagan to personally intervene in the situation. Appalled by the bloody television reports coming out of Beirut, Reagan told Begin in a phone call that the bombing had to end. According to Reagan’s description of the conversation in his memoirs, “I used the word ‘Holocaust’ deliberately and said the symbol of his country was becoming ‘a picture of a seven month old baby with its arms blown off.’ ”

These were certainly harsh words from the American president, and not surprisingly, Begin ordered an immediate halt to the bombing of West Beirut. Habib’s negotiations now moved forward more easily, eventually producing an agreement for the withdrawal of PLO guerrillas from Beirut. Supporters of Reagan have commended him for acting so assertively with Begin. One wonders, however, why Reagan did not intervene earlier. By the time he placed a phone call to Begin in August, the IDF had been in Lebanon for over two months. Using sophisticated American equipment, Israel had killed a countless number of civilians and left thousands homeless. Yet Reagan and his administration did nothing of any substance until public opinion shifted against the Israeli invasion in August. If Reagan had called Begin two months earlier on June 12, when Israel’s military intentions became abundantly clear, it is entirely possible that a

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11 Ball, 45.
great deal of the violence could have been averted. Moreover, swifter intervention on the part of the Reagan administration would have made it less necessary to involve the Marines.

As many of his biographers have noted, however, Reagan avoided conflict whenever possible. This decisionmaking strategy would have deadly consequences in Lebanon. From the beginning of July, Habib had urged Reagan to commit American forces to assist with the evacuation of the PLO from Beirut. He believed that the United States could maintain the peace by taking a position between the IDF and the PLO. In retrospect, a peacekeeping contingent from the United Nations probably would have been the better option, but at the time, Israel opposed such a plan. Arafat made it clear that the PLO would not withdraw from Lebanon without protection from the Israeli attack, and interestingly enough, he suggested that the United States could provide the safety needed for his departure. Habib supported this proposal, and he promised Arafat that the United States would protect the Palestinians who would remain in the country. Reagan finally ordered eight hundred Marines to Beirut on August 20 to oversee the removal of PLO guerrillas. After arriving in the Port of Beirut, the Marines installed several checkpoints in the immediate area. At Checkpoint 54, trucks filled with Arafat’s men stopped for a brief inspection. The Marines observed while a Lebanese civilian made sure that the men were not carrying any weapons other than AK-47s and handguns. After passing through the checkpoint, the trucks proceeded to the awaiting ships. PLO fighters fired

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their weapons in the air as they departed, but for the most part, the evacuation process went smoothly. By the first week of September, the remainder of the PLO had made their exit.14

The success of the mission was impressive by any standard. In less than two weeks, the Marines managed to safely remove over 10,000 PLO combatants along with Yasser Arafat. The Marines had achieved their objective, and taking the advice of both Vessey and Weinberger, Reagan approved their withdrawal on September 10. The Reagan administration now had good reason to feel optimistic about the future of Lebanon as well as the Middle East. While vacationing in California, Reagan delivered a televised speech in which he outlined his plans for Middle East peace. The September 1 speech later became known as the Reagan Plan, and in essence, it involved three underlying principles. It called on Israel to halt further settlement of the West Bank and to return much of the land that they acquired in 1967. In addition, Reagan proposed that the Palestinians should receive their own government, which would be developed under the guidance of Jordan.15 Begin immediately denounced the Reagan Plan in front of the Knesset, declaring that Israel would never relinquish the West Bank and Gaza. “We have no reason to get on our knees. No one will determine for us the borders of the Land of Israel,” he proclaimed.16 Many Arab leaders, however, responded enthusiastically to Reagan’s announcement. Jordan’s King Hussein described the plan as “the most

14 For a description of the PLO evacuation, see Hammel, 21-29.
15 Cannon, 355.
16 Begin quoted in Ball, 53.
courageous stand taken by an American administration since 1956." In reality, Reagan's peace initiative did nothing to bring stability to the Middle East. The settlement programs increased, the American loans to Israel kept flowing, and the administration essentially abandoned the plan that Secretary of State George Shultz, who replaced Haig at the end of June, had worked so hard to develop.

Although the first week of September was a time of unprecedented hope, subsequent events would quickly reveal that this optimism was nothing more than an illusion. On the afternoon of September 14, Bashir Gemayel, the president-elect of Lebanon, began a speech to his Phalange supporters but never finished it. A bomb exploded in the apartment above the political gathering, killing Gemayel and several of his close followers. Gemayel had been an ally of both the United States and Israel. Shortly before Gemayel's assassination, Secretary of Defense Weinberger met with him while visiting Beirut. Weinberger claims that Gemayel wanted the United States government to "use Lebanon as its strategic outpost in the Middle East." Gemayel understood the significance of Cold War politics, and it appears that his conversation with Weinberger was an attempt to exploit American fears of Soviet domination in the region. American soldiers stationed in Lebanon could be used to block the spread of communism while bringing peace and stability to his country. The Reagan administration would later say that Lebanon was an area of immense strategic importance, but if the country truly had such a pivotal role in

17 King Hussein quoted in Cannon, 355.
18 Schiff and Ya’ari, 247.
geopolitics, it is hard to explain why Weinberger dismissed Gemayel's proposal without even considering it.

The murder of Bashir Gemayel set in motion a chain of events that would lead to the second American intervention in Lebanon. On the day after the assassination, the IDF moved into West Beirut. The Israeli commander permitted Phalange militiamen to enter the Sabra and Shatila refugee settlements, which housed thousands of impoverished Palestinians. The militiamen explained to the Israelis that they were searching for terrorists, and beginning on September 16, they proceeded to massacre hundreds of the people living in the camps while the Israelis did nothing. It remains uncertain how many were slaughtered in the three-day rampage, but some place the death toll at over 1,000. Tragically, a significant number of those killed were women and children.20 In the aftermath of the massacre, Ariel Sharon resigned from his position amid considerable controversy. While Israel received much of the blame for what happened at Sabra and Shatila, Reagan officials had their own reasons to feel guilty. Philip Habib had promised Arafat that the Marines would guarantee the safety of those that remained in Beirut after the evacuation. Rather than leaving the Marines in Lebanon, however, Reagan pulled them out after only seventeen days, thirteen days earlier than expected. Everyone recognized that the tragedy could have been avoided if the Marines had not left the area. More than anything else, the feelings of guilt and embarrassment contributed to the second deployment of Marines. Robert McFarlane essentially admitted this during a symposium at

Quantico in 1993. According to his recollection of events, the Marines returned to Lebanon in what was nothing more than a “feel good mission, an apology really; a way of showing support without much recognition of the vulnerabilities that you were creating at the time.”

President Reagan formally announced on September 20 that the Marines would return to Lebanon. Unlike the previous mission, it is important to emphasize that the new objectives were not entirely clear. In a letter to Robert Dillon, the American Ambassador to Lebanon, Deputy-Prime Minister Fouad Boutros officially requested that the United States send 1,200 military personnel to Lebanon as part of a multinational “interposition force” to “facilitate the restoration of Lebanese Government sovereignty and authority over the Beirut area, and thereby further efforts of my government to assure the safety of persons in the area and bring to an end the violence which has tragically recurred.” How the multinational force was supposed to accomplish this mission remained ambiguous. The letter from Boutros is particularly revealing in that it proposes a close relationship between the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the United States. The Reagan administration would repeatedly contend that the Marines stationed in Lebanon were neutral and that they were there only to preserve the peace. Yet according to conditions established by

Boutros, the Americans were asked to "operate in close coordination with the LAF." In order to solidify the alliance between the two forces, liaison officers would be exchanged between them. Ambassador Dillon quickly sent a reply to Boutros in which he accepted the conditions that had been outlined in the letter.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff developed a mission statement for the second deployment of Marines that did not clarify the diplomatic notes exchanged on September 25. The stated objective of American forces was "[t]o establish an environment which will permit the Lebanese Armed Forces to carry out their responsibilities in the Beirut area . . . . [and] to occupy and secure positions along a designated section of the line from south of the Beirut International Airport to a position in the vicinity of the Presidential Palace." During the next fourteen months, the mission statement was modified only four times. The available evidence suggests that the Reagan administration agreed to the formation of the second multinational force for political reasons. If the future stability of Lebanon was critical to American interests in the Middle East, it remains unclear why Reagan authorized the insertion of only 1,200 servicemen. What is even more puzzlingly is the fact that no one gave much thought to the implementation of the mission on the ground. According to John Benson Matthews, "the stated mission was ill-conceived, ill-defined and improperly executed." When asked to describe the goals of the mission, officials within the White House frequently

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26 Report Of The DOD Commission, 35.
27 Ibid., 37.
28 Matthews, v.
gave contradictory answers. "Since no one seemed to know just what the
[M]arines were supposed to do nor was any clarification made later," argued
George Ball, "the terms of their projected stay was left in great confusion with
the Administration shifting carelessly from one formulation to another." 29

Despite the confusion, administration officials claimed that the Marines and
their counterparts in the multinational force were peacekeepers. In essence, they
were misleading the American public by only telling half of the story. The
Marines arrived in Lebanon to preserve the peace and to uphold the government
of Amin Gemayel, Bashir's brother. Given the size of the American force, both
objectives were unrealistic from the beginning. Moreover, by forming a close
alliance with the Lebanese Armed Forces, the United States was by no means a
neutral and disinterested party to the ongoing conflict within Lebanon. Shortly
after the assassination of Bashir Gemayel, an American military team visited
Beirut in order to evaluate the LAF. The leader of the delegation was Major
General Gerald T. Bartlett, and since he had helped to train forces in Saudi Arabia,
the military viewed him as a Middle East expert. Published in November, the so-
called Bartlett Report held that the LAF could maintain the peace after eighteen
months of training and could patrol the country's borders within three years. 30
The Bartlett Report closely resembled the military assessments performed during
the early years of the Vietnam War. While addressing strategic concerns like
manpower and weaponry, it did not adequately consider the unique historical
circumstances that pervaded the Lebanese conflict. Some military officials have

29 Ball, 62.
30 Matthews, 99.
also questioned the facts contained in the report. Colonel Patrick Collins has publicly admitted the duplicity of the military review performed in the fall of 1982: “We came to the conclusion, after visiting every bloody company in the Lebanese Army, that Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ couldn’t get that army together in two years if they had the wind behind them. The army did not exist, and the Bartlett Report was a bunch of baloney.”

By the time Bartlett and his colleagues announced their findings, the Marines had been in Lebanon for nearly two months. The report did not significantly alter their mission, but in December, they began to provide basic training to the LAF. More importantly, the idea that the LAF could uphold the peace on their own within eighteen months contributed to an illusion that is indicative of American foreign policy in the twentieth century. Provide a foreign army with American weaponry and training, according to this logic, and it is only a matter of time before that army can create a country favorable to American interests. Yet as the United States learned in the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam, a large group of men with guns cannot make a nation if they lack popular support. The Reagan administration never questioned the legitimacy of the Lebanese government, and throughout American intervention in the country, they continued to cling to an illusion.

Nothing reflects this illusion better than National Security Decision Directive 64. Entitled “Next Steps In Lebanon” and signed by Reagan on October 28, 1982, NSDD 64 outlined the “two principal objectives” of American

31 Colonel Patrick Collins quoted in Ibid., 102.
32 Hammel, 58.
involvement in the multinational force.\textsuperscript{33} The first objective was "the prompt disengagement and quickest orderly withdrawal of Israeli, Syrian and Palestinian armed forces from Lebanon."\textsuperscript{34} According to NSDD 64, this withdrawal could be achieved by the end of 1982. Reagan and his foreign policy advisors, in other words, believed that the Syrians, Israelis, and Palestinians would all volunteer to abandon their interests in Lebanon in only two months. The Syrians had been asked to intervene in the Lebanese Civil War in 1976, and they had stationed soldiers in Lebanon since that time. The expectation that they would disengage from Lebanon reflected an incredibly unrealistic assessment of the situation. Likewise, although the United States had a closer relationship with Israel, the Israelis expressed little interest in withdrawing from the country after having sacrificed so much during the June invasion.

The second objective delineated in NSDD 64 was the restoration of the Lebanese government. It committed the United States to strengthening the ability of the government to provide internal security, and it called for the rebuilding of the LAF.\textsuperscript{35} Like the first objective, the second downplayed the complexity of the Lebanese conflict. The officials responsible for NSDD 64 seemed to think that the Israelis, Syrians, and Palestinians were the only obstacle to a sovereign and peaceful Lebanon. Yet there was also a seemingly endless list of internal factions that did not recognize the authority of the Gemayel government. In essence, both objectives revealed a profound ignorance of what

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 1.
was actually happening in Beirut at the time. Senator Sam Nunn (Democrat-Georgia) would later characterize American objectives in Lebanon as "mission impossible," arguing that Reagan had placed the Marines in an "untenable military position." The Reagan administration wanted a stable Lebanese government, a powerful Lebanese army, and the removal of all foreign armies from the country. To accomplish these goals, Reagan sent 1,200 Marines to participate in a multinational force that included soldiers from France, Italy, and, eventually, Great Britain. This was truly an impossible mission. In the final paragraph of NSDD 64, there is a brief acknowledgement of the dangers associated with American intervention in Lebanon. However, since "our initiatives and our commitment to Lebanon's independence will further strengthen our credibility and demonstrate our determination to continue the progress we have already made," Reagan gave his approval for continued involvement. Interestingly, there is not a single reference to the Soviet Union in NSDD 64, which supports the argument that the threat of communism was something used to justify the mission after everything had gone terribly wrong.

The Marines, of course, were largely unaware of the policy decisions that led to their deployment. They arrived in Beirut on September 29, and they established their headquarters at Beirut International Airport. The Marines discovered that the area surrounding the airport was quite dangerous, since thousands of pieces of unexploded ordnance had accumulated from years of warfare. Before the Americans could move freely, mine-clearing teams were

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36 NBC, Meet The Press, 23 October 1983.
37 NSDD 64, 2.
dispatched to remove the ordnance. On September 30, Corporal David Reagan, a military engineer directing a mine-clearance team, somehow touched off a cluster bomblet that had been manufactured in the United States and used by the Israelis during their invasion. The explosion sent pellets into his stomach and head. Despite attempts to revive him, David Reagan became the first American servicemen killed in Lebanon.\(^{38}\) Reagan's death marked an ominous beginning to the second American intervention. Although the mission began with good intentions, it quickly became clear that administration officials had entangled themselves in a violent and chaotic environment that they did not fully comprehend.

In response to the first casualty in Lebanon, some politicians attempted to invoke the War Powers Act. Signed into law in November 1973 over Richard Nixon's veto, the act requires the President to provide official notification to Congress within 48 hours whenever American troops are committed to combat. If Congress does not approve the action, it mandates the withdrawal of all personnel within sixty days. Representative Clement J. Zablocki (Democrat-Wisconsin), for instance, compared American intervention in Lebanon to a person walking barefoot in a glass factory. Given the situation, he said, "[y]ou're bound to get cut."\(^{39}\) Zablocki believed that further hostilities were almost a certainty, and he called on Reagan to give notification in the event of another incident. Senator Thomas F. Eagleton (Democrat-Missouri), one of the

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co-authors of the War Powers Act, wrote a letter to Reagan in which he outlined
the relevance of Section 4a. Since he anticipated that Lebanon was a place
"where imminent involvement in hostilities is clearly indicated by the
circumstances," Eagleton argued that Reagan was obligated by law to notify
Congress. The Reagan administration denied the applicability of the War
Powers Act, claiming that there was no expectation of Marine involvement in
future hostilities. As the situation in Lebanon unfolded, however, these
expectations would be shattered on more than one occasion. The Marines would
indeed find themselves walking barefoot in a glass factory.

Yet the Marines in Beirut encountered little hostility from any faction until
they had been there for almost six months. Since Americans did not become
engaged in fighting, critics of Reagan’s approach to the Lebanese crisis were
essentially silenced. It appeared that the multinational force had helped to bring
renewed stability to the region after the tragic events in September. In fact,
many Muslims in Lebanon initially welcomed the presence of Americans. It
seemed to them that the Americans had arrived to prevent future Israeli attacks
on innocent civilians, and they viewed the Marines as a relatively neutral party.
When the Marines went out on routine patrols, they frequently received warm
greetings from the Lebanese people. An elderly Druze woman told John Benson
Matthews that the Americans gave her a new sense of hope. "We are so tired of
the killing," she allegedly said, "maybe it will all end now that you’re here." 41
Horrified by the atrocities committed at Sabra and Shatila, the non-Christian

40 Senator Thomas F. Eagleton to President Ronald Reagan, 23 September 1982,
Ronald Reagan Library (WHORM Subject File, CO086, Casefile 100743), 1.
41 Matthews, 142.
factions within Lebanon wanted protection from their enemies. They correctly believed that Marines came to Beirut as a result of the September massacres, but what they did not recognize at first was the close relationship between Amin Gemayel and the United States. Given the positive reception from the Lebanese, military leaders felt comfortable when asked to expand the patrols. Reagan authorized the Marines to extend their presence to heavily Christian East Beirut, and in the early part of November, they began to patrol the infamous Green Line, the boundary between East and West Beirut.42

When the administration came under fire in the aftermath of the barracks bombing, military officials would remind Congress about the warm welcome that they had received at the beginning of their mission. They pointed out that the Marines did not experience significant violence for several months. At some point in the future, historians will wonder whether this type of assessment was accurate or self-serving. Did the Marines really come into contact with supportive Muslim communities or were their recollections exaggerated to justify why they had been sent to Lebanon? In the absence of reliable sources, it is difficult to provide a satisfactory answer to this question. Nevertheless, it does appear that the Marines received support from factions that would eventually turn against them. On November 11, for example, Americans in the multinational force joined Lebanese Independence Day celebrations by running in a 10K road race through the streets of Beirut. They encountered no opposition along the way, and Matthews correctly observes that "[terrorists] could have

shot any number of them as they jogged the streets of Beirut, unarmed, and in their running shorts." Participation in a public event such as this would become unthinkable a year later, and while the absence of terrorist attacks in the early months of American intervention does not prove that none were considered, it certainly suggests that the Marines did experience a brief period of peace in Beirut.

The Marines were never neutral peacekeepers, but they did perform duties that are often associated with peacekeeping missions. At the end of February 1983, an unusually harsh winter storm descended on Lebanon. In conjunction with the Red Cross, the Marines conducted a relief mission to the desolate mountainous region east of Beirut. They traveled nineteen hours to the village of Qatarba where they found snow drifts that were sixteen feet high in certain spots. The Americans evacuated anyone in need of medical treatment, dug through the snow to look for survivors, and provided food and heating fuel to the villagers. After completing the evacuations, the Marines returned to Beirut. The February rescue was one of the few tangible achievements of America’s eighteen month involvement in the country. In freezing temperatures, the Marines had climbed treacherous mountain roads in order to save lives. Yet even in what was certainly their finest hour, the Marines participated in the mission at the request of the Lebanese government. It also should be noted that Qatarba has a predominantly Christian population. Although the rescue operation was a humanitarian effort, it was far from neutral.

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43 Matthews, 137.
44 Hammel, 68-71.
In fact, one wonders whether the Gemayel government would have asked for assistance if the village had been a Muslim stronghold.

There are some Middle East experts who contend that the United States missed a an excellent opportunity between October and February to resolve the Lebanese crisis. According to Augustus Richard Norton, “October, November, and December 1982 were three critical months in which the future of Lebanon was to be fatefuly shaped.” 46 The window of opportunity thesis has been endorsed by many of Reagan’s top foreign policy advisers. Geoffrey Kemp, a high ranking National Security Council official during the Reagan administration, adamantly believes that there could have been “a different outcome to the Lebanon tragedy if the United States responded in a different way.” 47 From the perspectives of both Norton and Kemp, the objectives enshrined in NSDD 64 were achievable. The Syrians had been weakened by the Israeli invasion, and if the United States had only put more pressure on them, they would have left Lebanon. In essence, since America did not act quickly enough, the Soviet Union supplied the Syrians with new equipment, which made it less necessary for them to acquiesce to American demands. Norton and Kemp correctly observe that the Reagan administration could have done more to intervene diplomatically during the so-called window of opportunity. Yet even if the United States had acted differently in the final months of 1982, it is unlikely that Syria would have removed their troops from Lebanon without a major confrontation. The window of opportunity thesis also neglects the internal dynamics of the

46 Norton quoted in Matthews, 129.
47 Kemp quoted in Ibid., 129.
Lebanese conflict. Like the authors of NSDD 64, Norton and Kemp gave much consideration to the presence of foreign countries in Lebanon, but they failed to adequately consider the multiple factions within the country that made peace close to impossible. Ironically, even in criticizing the foreign policy of the Reagan administration, these experts have been overly optimistic about the possibility of an alternative outcome to America’s involvement in Lebanon.

In reality, the window of opportunity for success in Lebanon closed much earlier than Norton has suggested. When Reagan decided to deploy the second multinational force to Beirut in September 1982, he expected that the American presence would lead to peace. Yet his failure to assign realistic objectives to the mission put American lives in jeopardy. Between October and February, the Marines experienced almost no resistance from the warring factions in the region. But everything began to change during the month of March. The Italian contingent of the multinational force came under fire on March 15 when unidentified men fired rocket-propelled grenades at two Italian jeeps traveling in the vicinity of the Beirut International Airport. After Italian reinforcements arrived on the scene, the gunmen fired on them as well. Nine Italians were wounded in the incident, and at the time, reports indicated that two of the men had been paralyzed while another lost his right foot.48 On the following day, five Americans on patrol in Beirut received minor shrapnel wounds after someone tossed a hand grenade at them. None of the Marines were seriously hurt, and they quickly returned to active duty.49

49 Hammel, 74-75.
Although it was unclear whether the attacks had been coordinated, all of the members of the multinational force recognized that the violence was an attempt to undermine their mission. Colonel James Mead, the commander of the Marines in Lebanon, promised that “[w]e will not allow a single act of terrorism to stop us from our mission,” and White House spokesperson Larry Speakes assured reporters that it was only an “isolated incident.” Subsequent events would reveal that Speakes had offered an inaccurate assessment of the situation. On March 17, the Italians returned fire in four different incidents. The next day two hand grenades were thrown at thirty French paratroopers in Chiyah, but no one was wounded in the attack. The four days of violence in March marked the conclusion to over five months of peace, and from that point to the withdrawal of American forces in 1984, it became abundantly clear that elements within Lebanon wanted the multinational force gone. The evidence obviously indicates that the Marines and their counterparts were being targeted. Despite the tragic turn of events in the middle of March, the Reagan administration did not re-consider its policy in Lebanon. The Marines were there as peacekeepers, and they would remain until Lebanon was stable. No one seemed to understand that the 1,200 Americans serving in the multinational force were at the center of an incredibly dangerous situation. From Reagan’s vantage point, there was simply “no reverse gear” to American intervention in Lebanon.

50 “5 U.S. Marines And 9 Italians Wounded In Lebanon,” A11.
52 Reagan quoted in Hammel, 75.
The president of the United States, of course, always has the ability to reverse previous foreign policy decisions. Yet from the beginning of America’s participation in the multinational force, Reagan made promises that severely limited his options in Lebanon. His lofty rhetoric committed the United States to a situation that would markedly deteriorate after the March attacks. On April 18, 1983, a van loaded with explosives detonated in front of the American embassy in Beirut. Of the sixty-three people killed in the blast, seventeen were Americans. The explosion was particularly devastating for the Central Intelligence Agency, which lost both Kenneth Haas, the Beirut station chief, and Robert Ames, the agency’s top Middle East expert.53 Many Americans in the embassy sustained serious injuries. Chief Warrant Officer Rayford Byers, who was helping to train the LAF, “lost his left eye, suffered head injuries which required two craniotomies, broke both collar bones, his left arm, and all his ribs.”54 Byers remained conscious despite the agonizing pain, and his screams eventually drew the attention of a Lebanese boy. Ambassador Robert Dillon found himself trapped under a piece of debris, but with the assistance of other embassy workers, he managed to escape from the building unscathed. In the days that followed, Consul Diane Dillar shuttled from the morgue and emergency room at American University Hospital to the embassy in order to determine who had been killed.55 For someone accustomed to the routine

53 Martin and Walcott, 109.
bureaucratic work of an embassy, it must have been an incredibly difficult task.

The severity of the explosion was unprecedented, but it was not entirely unexpected. Shortly before the incident, the National Security Agency intercepted messages that suggested an attack on the multinational force was imminent. Unfortunately, the intercepts did not contain any specific information about the deadly plot.\(^5^6\) When reports of the bombing reached Washington, the Reagan administration reacted with shock and outrage. At the beginning of his presidency, Reagan had assured all Americans that the United States would have no tolerance for international terrorism. "Let terrorists beware that when the rules of international behavior are violated," he proclaimed, "our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution."\(^5^7\) Reagan made this declaration at a White House ceremony to celebrate the return of the Americans who had been held hostage in Iran for 444 days. After the embassy attack in April 1983, Reagan appeared ready to uphold his policy on terrorism. He told the families of the victims that the suicide bombing was an "act of unparalleled cowardice" that "was an attack on all of us, on our way of life and on the values we hold dear."\(^5^8\) Rather than withdrawing from Lebanon, Reagan said that the United States had an obligation to remain in the country. "We would indeed fail them if we let that act deter us from carrying on their mission of brotherhood and peace," he warned.\(^5^9\)

Surprisingly, Reagan did not retaliate against the terrorists responsible for

\(^{5^6}\) Martin and Walcott, 105.
\(^{5^7}\) Ibid., 43.
\(^{5^8}\) Reagan quoted in Cannon, 360.
\(^{5^9}\) Reagan quoted in Ibid., 360.
the explosion. The National Security Agency had decoded intercepts linking the plot to the Iranian Foreign Ministry and the Iranian Embassy in Syria, but despite the quality of the evidence, which included a $25,000 money transfer from Iran to finance the operation, the Reagan administration did not execute its policy of swift and effective retribution.60 Instead of retaliating, Reagan renewed America's commitment to the faltering Gemayel government. The CIA did manage to track down four suspects in the case, and one of the agents involved in the interrogation was eventually fired for brutally beating confessions out of the prisoners. The information obtained from the suspects confirmed that the attack originated in Syria, but interestingly, it appears that most of the men who participated in the execution of the mission lived in Lebanon. In fact, the conspirators had even managed to recruit a Palestinian worker in the American Embassy to signal them when Ambassador Dillon was in the building.61 The involvement of Lebanese civilians in the attack contradicts the idea that it was entirely unrelated to United States foreign policy. While the evidence indicates that Iran and Syria were key participants, it also reveals that the success of the plot depended on local support. It remains unclear why these men decided to join the suicide mission, but they obviously did not consider the Americans in Beirut to be neutral peacekeepers.

If nothing else, the embassy bombing in April should have prompted Reagan and his advisers to re-consider American objectives in Lebanon. Reagan, of course, decided to keep the Marines in the country while continuing to hope

60 Martin and Walcott, 105.
61 Ibid., 105.
for the withdrawal of all foreign forces. In the aftermath of the attack, historians know that the administration attempted to work harder to achieve this objective. Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 92 ("Accelerating the Withdrawal of Foreign Forces from Lebanon") less than ten days after the incident. Unfortunately for researchers, NSDD 92 remains entirely classified at present. When this document is declassified, it will be possible to provide a more definitive assessment of what officials were considering in the spring of 1983. In a larger sense, however, it is abundantly clear that Reagan willfully ignored the dangers that confronted all of the Americans stationed in Lebanon at the time. It is difficult to understand why the Reagan administration did not do more to protect the multinational force given the vulnerabilities that became obvious on April 18. Yet according to General Vessey, the answer is actually quite simple; "[a]lthough it was a great tragedy," he maintains, "it seemed like an inexplicable aberration." Six months later, when another suicide mission killed 241 American servicemen, Reagan would realize how wrong they had been.

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63 Martin and Walcott, 105.
Chapter 2: The End of Innocence

Lebanon will, in my mind, always stand as a major reproach to me because I was not more persuasive, in all the meetings we held, to prevent the worst loss of military lives to occur during the time I was at the Pentagon.--Caspar Weinberger

In the month that followed the embassy bombing in April, Secretary of State George Shultz increased his efforts to resolve the ongoing Lebanese crisis. Shultz's negotiations helped to produce the peace treaty between Israel and Lebanon that was signed on May 17, 1983. Commonly known as the May 17 agreement, the document technically ended Israel's war against Lebanon. Both nations agreed to respect the international border separating them, and the agreement established a security region in southern Lebanon. The security zone, of course, was one of Israel's primary demands, since they wanted to prevent the resurgence of terrorist attacks against settlements in the north. According to the terms of the agreement, Israel pledged to completely withdraw their forces from Lebanon within three months. At the time, it appeared that Shultz had managed to achieve the impossible. Yet other administration officials were extremely skeptical of the May 17 agreement. "Why such an agreement was reported to us in such glowing terms by George Shultz has always remained a mystery to me," observed Weinberger in his memoirs. Skeptics in the administration knew something that the American public did not; in order to get Israel's approval, Shultz had arranged a secret side letter that essentially

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1 Weinberger, 173.
3 Weinberger, 155-156.
undermined the entire peace agreement. The letter, which would later become public, said that Israel would only have to withdraw if there was a simultaneous evacuation of Syrian forces.4

Once again, the Reagan administration revealed that it did not understand the complexity of the relationship between Lebanon, Israel, and Syria. According to George Ball’s astute analysis of the May 17 agreement, “[h]ow any American government could have so wildly misread the reactions of Damascus will no doubt puzzle future historians.”5 It is indeed confusing to understand why Shultz described the agreement so optimistically, especially since he was fully aware of the side letter. Shultz, like many of Reagan’s advisers, has blamed the failure of the peace accords on the Soviet Union and Syria, who supposedly “were determined to see that the region remained a tense and dangerous place.”6 By accusing the Syrians of prolonging the crisis in Lebanon, he gave the impression that they had been involved in the negotiations and then backed out afterwards. In reality, the only parties bound by the May 17 agreement were Lebanon and Israel. Ball has convincingly argued that Shultz would have been more successful if he had included Syrian representatives. From his perspective, “[a] less obtuse American diplomacy would have recognized Syria’s security concerns and predicted that, if Israel were offered a security zone, the Syrians would inevitably insist on a comparable zone of their own.”7 Syria, in other words, believed that their interests in Lebanon had been ignored. They had been invited to Lebanon

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4 Ball, 66.
5 Ibid., 68.
6 Shultz, 220.
7 Ball, 69.
rather than invading it, but unlike Israel, they were not receiving any incentive to leave.

In essence, the Reagan administration continued to defend Israeli demands. Shultz could have done more to force the withdrawal of the IDF from Lebanon, but his acceptance of the secret side letter made the May 17 agreement irrelevant from the moment it was signed. Rather than bringing stability to Lebanon, the treaty actually contributed to an increasing level of domestic turmoil. Amin Gemayel soon realized that he had acquired many enemies by supporting the peace accords. The political factions that opposed Gemayel's rule discovered that the agreement provided them with a sense of unity, and in July, a coalition called the National Salvation Front was formed to prevent the implementation of the treaty. The National Salvation Front exposed the relationship between the United States and the Lebanese government. Not surprisingly, opponents of Gemayel viewed the Marines as an army of occupation; Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze, made this point abundantly clear while visiting Syria: "The mere fact that they [the Marines] are providing the Lebanese factional army with logistic support, expertise, and training is enough for us to consider them enemies."\(^8\)

Prior to the May 17 agreement, opposition to the multinational force certainly existed. The Marines had been attacked in March, and at the beginning of May, someone on the ground fired a missile at an American helicopter. When news of the negotiations reached Lebanon, however, hostility to the United States became even more widespread, since the treaty seemed to reward Israel

\(^8\) Jumblatt quoted in Sarieddine, 210.
for the 1982 invasion. Opposition leaders finally grasped that the United States was taking sides with the Gemayel government. The Reagan administration worked hard to prevent Gemayel from backing away from the agreement, but in order to mollify the opposition, he later decided to oppose it.\(^9\)

In retrospect, when the failure of the May 17 agreement became apparent to his administration, Reagan should have ordered the Marines to withdraw. The twin objectives of American policy in Lebanon—internal stability and the complete withdrawal of foreign armies—remained entirely out of reach despite months of negotiations from Shultz. Both Syria and Israel remained in Lebanon, and the political situation in Beirut was actually getting worse. The administration had hoped that the American contingent of the multinational force would help to achieve the objectives of the United States. During the congressional hearings that followed the barracks attack, military officials explained that their mission in Beirut was to establish an American presence that would facilitate diplomatic efforts. One member of the Committee On Armed Services jokingly remarked that the position of the Marines was analogous to a bouncer in a night club who does not have the authority to remove unruly patrons.\(^10\) When seen in this light, the entire concept of presence seemed somewhat ridiculous. In fairness, though, some administration officials did recommend the withdrawal of the Marines prior to October 23. Realizing that the multinational force could not help the United States attain their objectives,

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\(^9\) Ball, 70.

Weinberger believed that it was time to end the mission. "Because we could not achieve the objectives for which we had entered," Weinberger has explained, "I urged repeatedly that we should dissolve the MNF and leave." 11

Despite the recommendations of Weinberger, however, the Marines remained at Beirut International Airport. Factions within Lebanon continued to target the multinational force during the summer of 1983. It became normal for the Marines to receive sniper fire, and at the end of July, two Americans were wounded. According to the rules of engagement enacted for the mission, the Marines could only fire in self-defense. The Americans frequently saw armed men walking near their fortifications at the airport. Since they understood that the Marines were completely helpless, the militiamen sometimes taunted them. They entertained themselves by pointing at the Americans and yelling, "bang, bang." 12 The Marines, unable to shoot back in these situations, could only respond with their middle fingers.

All of the joking ended on August 28, 1983 when the Marines were granted permission to return fire for the first time since they had been sent to Beirut. 13 On the following day, the Americans came under intense mortar fire along the perimeter of the airport. One of the rounds hit the tent that housed the command of the 1st Platoon, wounding several men and killing both Staff Sergeant Alexander Ortega and Second Lieutenant George Losey. 14 Prior to August 29, the attacks on the multinational force had been mostly sporadic. The

11 Weinberger, 158.
12 Hammel, 123.
13 Cannon, 366.
shelling that killed Ortega and Losey was unprecedented; based on the available
descriptions of the incident, it seems apparent that the Marines were the intended
targets of the mortar fire. Some officials suggested that the summer violence
had little connection to the American mission in Lebanon. They gave the
impression that the Marines simply had been caught in the cross-fire. In the
opinion of General Paul X. Kelley, the Commandant of the Marines, "[w]hoever
is shooting at us . . . is shooting more at where we are than who we are. There is
no indication anybody is purposefully taking [M]arines under fire."15 This
assessment is inaccurate to say the least, and it is also should be noted that the
first American combat deaths in Beirut occurred on the day after the Marines
returned fire. Although it is impossible to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that
the two events were connected, basic common sense certainly suggests that the
decision to return fire on August 28 directly contributed to the deadly attack on
the next day.

The violence in August convinced the Marine commanders in Beirut that
they needed to move their men to a safer location. Tragically, the building that
they selected would be the one destroyed by a suicide bomber in October, but at
the time, the sturdy concrete structure provided the Marines with protection
against snipers and mortar fire.16 Within a week after the deaths of Ortega and
Losey, Israel withdrew from the Shuf, a mountainous region overlooking Beirut,
and moved south to the Awali River. The withdrawal of the Israelis led to the
deterioration of an already chaotic situation. With the LAF and the Druze militia

15 Kelley quoted in Ball, 74.
16 Weinberger, 157.
clashing in the Shuf, the Marines continued to occupy the low ground around the airport. This became an increasingly hazardous position, and two Marines were killed on September 6. Four days later, President Reagan issued National Security Decision Directive 103 (“Strategy For Lebanon”). NSDD 103 re-iterated the two objectives outlined in NSDD 64, which implied that the mission in Lebanon had not changed since the initial deployment of American forces. In reality, though, NSDD 103 significantly altered American objectives in the region. It concluded that “material and training assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces should be accelerated and expanded as feasible,” and more importantly, it called for the “aggressive self-defense against hostile or provocative acts from any quarter.”

Three sections on the second page of NSDD 103 remain classified, and when these are opened to the public, researchers will have a more complete understanding of American strategy in September 1983. Nevertheless, aggressive self-defense is undoubtedly the key phrase in NSDD 103. How aggressive self-defense differed from regular self-defense was never clarified, and the authors of the directive remained committed to the idea that the Marines were acting as peacekeepers. “Our actions in this regard should demonstrate our impartiality in the confessional conflict,” the document stated. Yet the multinational force had been working in conjunction with the LAF since their arrival a year earlier. During the first year of American intervention in Lebanon,

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17 Ball, 74.
19 Ibid., 1.
the United States had provided training, weapons, and logistical support to the soldiers loyal to Amin Gemayel. On Sunday, September 11, the Reagan administration took the relationship between Gemayel and the United States government to the next level. The intense fighting in the Shuf on the previous day between the Druze and LAF raised the possibility that the Lebanese government might lose the strategic village of Suq-al-Gharb, and if this happened, hostile factions would be within striking distance of East Beirut.

Robert McFarlane, the successor to Philip Habib as Middle Eastern special envoy, conferred with advisers to discuss the latest developments in Beirut. As journalists David C. Martin and John Walcott have explained, McFarlane proceeded to send a flash cable from Lebanon to Washington that they describe as “the most dramatic document in the sad history of the American involvement in Lebanon.”

Reagan’s top foreign policy advisers would later refer to McFarlane’s message as the sky is falling cable. The opening sentences of the cable reflect a sense of urgency and panic: “There is a serious threat of a decisive military defeat which could involve the fall of the Government of Lebanon within twenty-four hours. Last night’s battle was waged within five kilometers of the Presidential Palace. For those at the State Department, this would correlate to the enemy attacking from Capitol Hill.” McFarlane made specific reference to NSDD 103, arguing that the fall of Suq-al-Gharb would put the multinational force in the line of fire. As a consequence, he called on Washington to assist the LAF with fire support. Oddly enough, he reasoned that such a

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20 Martin and Walcott, 119.
21 Ibid., 119.
display of force would be defensive action. According to McFarlane’s assessment of the situation, “we must recognize that to wait until an attack tonight is at our doorstep before responding would be too late.”

McFarlane later explained that he considered September 11 to be “the moment of truth for our entire Lebanese strategy.” If the LAF lost control of Suq-al-Gharb, he believed that the Gemayel government would be overthrown. In fairness to McFarlane, he correctly perceived that the level of violence was escalating. The American ambassador’s residence in Beirut had been hit with shrapnel during the fighting, and intelligence reports from the field indicated that a Lebanese commander had been hacked to death with an axe. After sending the cable to Washington, McFarlane called National Security Adviser William Clark. He told Clark that the “basic strategy” of the United States government was at stake, reminding him “that Americans are also under fire and the existing rules of engagement provide authority for returning fire if you’re being fired upon.”

Although McFarlane had good reason to be concerned about the outbreak of hostilities in the Shuf, he did not adequately question the information that he received from the Lebanese government. He observed in his cable that the attack on Suq-al-Gharb was “unambiguously foreign.” Given this analysis of the situation, it appears that McFarlane accepted the intelligence sources that linked the violence to Syrian officers and Palestinian soldiers. It is possible that foreign forces participated in the fighting outside of Beirut, but it is also clear that

22 Ibid., 120.
23 Robert C. McFarlane (with Zofia Smardz), Special Trust (New York: Cadell & Davies, 1994), 250.
24 Ibid., 251.
25 Martin and Walcott, 119.
the Druze militia, one of the many factions within Lebanon that opposed Gemayel, had a central role in the conflict. Therefore, McFarlane's description of the situation was misleading; there was a considerable amount of ambiguity that McFarlane either did not understand or ignored.

In retrospect, September 11 was not the moment of truth for American involvement in Lebanon. Yet McFarlane's cable and his subsequent phone call to Clark persuaded officials in Washington to write an addendum to NSDD 103. Signed by President Reagan on September 11, the addendum echoed the concerns that McFarlane had expressed earlier that day: "It has been determined that occupation of the dominant terrain in the vicinity of SUQ-AL-GHARB by hostile forces will endanger Marine positions."26 The modification to NSDD 103 authorized the use of naval fire and air strikes to help the LAF defend Suq-al-Gharb. In addition to barring the use of ground forces, the addendum gave the American commander in Beirut the authority to determine when the village was in jeopardy of falling to the enemy.27 Interestingly, despite McFarlane's predictions, the LAF retained control of Suq-al-Gharb without American assistance. A week later, however, Colonel Timothy Geraghty, the commander of the Marines in Lebanon, received an order to fire on Suq-al-Gharb. According to two officers who overheard Geraghty speaking with his superiors on the phone, he attempted to protest the order: "Do you realize if you do that, we'll get slaughtered down here? We could be severely attacked. We're totally vulnerable. We're sitting ducks."28 In the end, Geraghty obeyed the command,

27 Ibid., 1.
28 Geraghty quoted in Wright, 78.
and on September 19, the navy opened fire on the LAF's opposition. The USS Virginia, a navy cruiser, and three other ships participated in the attack.29

Eighteen days later, Colonel Thomas Fintel, who was responsible for training the LAF, concluded that the Lebanese most likely could have held onto Suq-al-Gharb even if the United States had not intervened. Moreover, previous reports suggested that the LAF had sustained heavy casualties while fighting to defend the village, but in reality, less than ten Lebanese soldiers had been killed.30 To put it simply, McFarlane's cable was wildly inaccurate. He claimed that the fall of one location would lead to the collapse of the Lebanese government, and he also gave the impression that the Syrians were determined to take over Lebanon. In fact, after the USS Virginia shelled the enemies of the LAF, McFarlane visited the battle site in order to evaluate what happened. In describing this visit in his memoirs, McFarlane compared the victory at Suq-al-Gharb to the Tet offensive in Vietnam. "Just as the North Vietnamese had decided to challenge the Americans and the local national government and failed," he said, "so, too, had Syrian-backed elements tried and failed [in Lebanon]."31 McFarlane clung to the illusion that the entire Lebanese crisis was inextricably connected to Syria. If the United States could get the Syrians out of Lebanon, he believed, the Gemayel government would be stabilized. His reasoning epitomized the style of decisionmaking that led Lyndon Johnson to escalate the war in Vietnam; with American determination and military power, it would be possible to create a nation in the image of the United States.

29 McFarlane, 251.
30 Wright, 78.
31 McFarlane, 252.
Unfortunately, as Johnson learned during Vietnam, American intervention—even the commitment of over 500,000 soldiers—does not guarantee success. Yet Robert McFarlane never learned the lessons of Vietnam. Rather than focusing on negotiations to achieve American objectives in Lebanon, he thought that military supremacy would suffice. McFarlane even attempted to intimidate President Hafez al-Assad of Syria by mentioning that Reagan had ordered the deployment of the USS New Jersey, the navy's only battleship, to the Lebanese shore.\(^{32}\) When Assad reacted indifferently to the news, McFarlane did not know how to respond. McFarlane's strategy clearly "showed a lamentable naivete" that made Assad much more resistant to withdrawing his soldiers from the country.\(^{33}\) In retrospect, the Reagan administration should have made genuine concessions to Assad. Given the intimidation tactics that McFarlane used, it is not surprising why Syria became increasingly distrustful of the United States during the Reagan presidency. Having failed to win concessions from Assad, McFarlane became so desperate that he contacted his pastor to pray for peace in Lebanon.\(^{34}\) The United States truly needed a miracle in the fall of 1983, but divine intervention never arrived.

The violent turn of events between August and September drew the attention of both the House of Representatives and the Senate. At the end of August, Senator Robert Byrd (Democrat-West Virginia) wrote a letter to Reagan in which he demanded acknowledgement of the War Powers Act and "a

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\(^{32}\) Ibid., 253.
\(^{33}\) Ball, 80.
\(^{34}\) McFarlane, 253.
reassessment of the situation" in Lebanon.\textsuperscript{35} He reminded Reagan that the Marines had been committed with the expectation of a relatively short mission, and he emphasized the importance of having clearly defined objectives. Representative Henry B. Gonzalez (Democrat-Texas) also requested Reagan to re-consider America's presence in the conflict, since both Syria and Israel appeared intransigent. "In these conditions," wrote Gonzalez, "it is not only prudent, but absolutely necessary, to ask what the further risk of our young men can accomplish, what our interests are, and whether or not change[s] in policy are warranted."\textsuperscript{36} For the first time since it had been passed in 1973, Congress invoked the War Powers Act. Opponents of Reagan's policy correctly believed that the Marines were now involved in combat, and as a consequence, they demanded that Reagan officially notify both houses of Congress under the provisions of the act.

The debate that ensued within Congress would eventually produce a compromise on September 29. The legislation permitted the extension of the mission for another eighteen months, but in return, the Reagan administration agreed to accept the applicability of the War Powers Act. In the Senate, while only two Democrats voted in favor of the bill, all but three Republicans gave their support to the Reagan administration. Senator Dan Quayle, a Republican from Indiana, explained that the legislation was designed to give Reagan and his advisers "breathing room," but he also observed that the Senate vote was not


\textsuperscript{36} Representative Henry B. Gonzalez to President Ronald Reagan, 2 September 1983, Ronald Reagan Library (WHORM Subject File, CO086, Casefile 161467), 2.
the equivalent of a blank check: “I would hope he knows that there’s not a true, genuine support for his policies in Congress.” 37 Senate Democrats argued that Reagan had placed Americans in a dangerous position that would only get worse. “Some say that Lebanon is not Vietnam,” said Senator Edward Kennedy (Democrat-Massachusetts); “But I reply, we must not give the President the power to turn it into one.” 38 However, since the Democrats did not hold the majority in the Senate, they could not block the measure.

The opponents of Reagan’s policy in Lebanon missed the opportunity to mount a strong resistance in the House of Representatives where the Democrats were the majority party. House Speaker Tip O’Neill orchestrated the deal with the White House over the War Powers Act, and his political maneuvering persuaded 130 Democrats to vote for the legislation. O’Neill’s decision to support the administration revealed a profound ignorance of American foreign policy. At the beginning of September, he had been invited to a meeting with Robert McFarlane. McFarlane, of course, told O’Neill that the Syrians and Israelis would soon withdraw from Lebanon and that the Lebanese government had promised to reform the cabinet. “Put that way,” O’Neill recalled, “the presence of the [M]arines made sense. But at the time, nobody mentioned that their real mission [sic] was to protect the highly exposed Beirut airport.” 39. Given his position of power, O’Neill had the responsibility to critically evaluate the information that he received from McFarlane. Anyone familiar with the

38 Ibid., A1.
Lebanese situation would have told him that the withdrawal of foreign forces was not imminent. Yet O'Neill never sought the advice of an unbiased State Department analyst, and as a result, he became the pawn of the Reagan administration. According to John Aloysius Farrell, "the White House had skillfully manipulated the Speaker--getting him to endorse an unpopular and unwise exercise in Lebanon . . . [and then using] him for cover when it went sour . . . "40

Not only did O'Neill arrange the eighteen month extension, he delivered a poignant speech in which he implored fellow Democrats to support the Marines stationed in Lebanon. He assured his colleagues that Reagan was deeply concerned with the safety of the American contingent of the multinational force, and representatives claimed that the speech changed several votes.41 In essence, O'Neill turned Lebanon into a political bargaining chip; although he was obviously a consummate politician when it came to domestic issues, he simply did not understand the value of statesmanship. Frustrated with Reagan's victory in Congress, Senator Robert Byrd nicely summarized the fundamental problem of the legislation: "Politics is the art of compromise. War is not."42 Several months later, when O'Neill turned against American involvement in Lebanon, Reagan accused him of being unpatriotic. Outraged by the comment, O'Neill went on the offensive. "The deaths [of the Marines] lie on him [Reagan] and the defeat in Lebanon lies on him and him alone," he declared.43 Although O'Neill

41 Ibid., 615.
42 Roberts, A8.
43 O'Neill quoted in Farrell, 619.
had every right to feel betrayed, someone with his political experience should have known better. He had the opportunity to pressure Reagan to end American intervention in Lebanon, but he failed to take advantage of the situation in September. In fairness, even if O'Neill managed to force Reagan to pull out the Marines, it is unlikely that the withdrawal would have been executed before the barracks bombing on October 23. At the same time, however, O'Neill shares at least some of the blame for what was one of the worst debacles in the history of American foreign relations.

During the time between the Congressional compromise and the attack on the Marines in Beirut, the situation on the ground remained unstable despite the successful intervention at Suq-al-Gharb. American helicopters came under fire at the beginning of October, and the following week two Marines were killed in separate incidents. The multinational force repeatedly returned fire against enemy snipers who were targeting them from buildings in the vicinity of the airport. Even Reagan's supporters began to recognize that the American deaths were not accidental. At this point, the existing divisions within the cabinet hardened. Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, who had opposed the Lebanon venture from the beginning, clashed with McFarlane and Secretary of State George Shultz. Although Shultz and McFarlane believed that withdrawal from Lebanon would undermine the credibility of the United States in the Middle East, Weinberger saw it differently. On October 18, 1983, Weinberger informed President Reagan at a meeting of the National Security Planning Group (NSPG)
that the Pentagon recommended the removal of the Marines from the airport.\textsuperscript{44} Weinberger developed an extensive argument to support the military’s recommendation. He argued that the position in Beirut was indefensible; that the CIA had credible information to suggest the possibility of terrorist attacks on the multinational force; that the last vestiges of neutrality had been destroyed when the navy fired to support the LAF; and that American casualties were on the rise.\textsuperscript{45} After Weinberger finished, journalist Patrick Sloyan has explained that the NSPG took a short break. Weinberger apparently removed his recommendation from the agenda before the meeting re-convened. It remains unclear why Weinberger did this, and it also should be noted that the Reagan administration refuted Sloyan’s account when it first appeared in 1984.

Future historians will want to closely examine what happened at the NSPG meeting on October 18. If Weinberger presented the Pentagon recommendation with such forcefulness, in other words, why did he withdraw it during the break? As more documents are de-classified, it will become possible to provide a much better explanation for his actions. Assuming that Sloyan’s version of events is accurate, Reagan never actually rejected the military’s request to withdraw the Marines from Lebanon. Once again, Reagan avoided making a decision that would have created conflict in his cabinet. A more decisive president would have acted differently. "Had Reagan given the order that day," Sloyan has claimed, "the troops could have been evacuated within twenty-four hours, Marine Corps

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 410.
officers estimated at the time." This piece of information is somewhat misleading, since it appears that the Marine estimate was geared towards a worst-case scenario. If Reagan had decided to withdraw the Americans in the multinational force, it almost certainly would have been a gradual evacuation. As a consequence, the implication that the barracks bombing could have been averted at the NSPG meeting on October 18 is unfounded. Yet one wonders why administration officials did not request the tightening of security in Beirut given CIA reports of a potential terrorist attack.

On the day after the meeting, a Marine convoy in Beirut became the target of an unsuccessful ambush. The failed attack confirmed the reliability of CIA sources in the region, and less than a week later, a suicide bomber destroyed the Marine headquarters at the Beirut International Airport, killing 241 Americans. McFarlane, who had been recently appointed National Security Adviser, notified Reagan of the attack at around 2:30 AM. Reagan and his wife returned to Washington from their vacation at Augusta National Golf Course four hours later. The National Security Council convened for an emergency meeting in the White House Situation Room, and as the day progressed, the casualty reports arriving from Beirut only got worse.

Speaking from the Roosevelt Room on the morning of October 23, Weinberger said that the United States had evidence linking the bombing to Iran and even suggested that the Soviet Union was a potential suspect. Interestingly, Weinberger told television viewers that America could not “simply walk away”

46 Ibid., 410.
47 Reagan, 453.
from Lebanon, since the country was “absolutely vital to our national interest.” The anger of the administration was understandable given the circumstances, but the declarations of Weinberger and other officials were reckless and misleading. Weinberger never really believed that Lebanon had any strategic value, but in that interview, he unveiled the strategy that the White House would use to justify American involvement in Lebanon in the aftermath of the bombing. To be sure, some people in the White House—most notably McFarlane and the president himself—sincerely interpreted the Lebanese crisis as an outgrowth of the Cold War. Yet for the most part, the administration used the Soviet Union to deflect criticism. The United States had intervened in Lebanon for political reasons that were only remotely related to the Cold War, but when everything began to fall apart and public support evaporated, officials suddenly gave the impression that the collapse of Lebanon would lead to Soviet domination of the Middle East.

Reagan promised the nation in a televised address that his administration would seek retribution for the attack. “Those who directed this atrocity must be dealt justice, and they will be,” he declared. Other officials within the administration made similar comments, and the FBI immediately launched an investigation into the barracks bombing. Although Reagan appeared ready to execute his policy of swift and effective retribution against those responsible for the deaths of 241 Americans, he never followed through on his promises. FBI investigators concluded that the explosion was the result of thorough planning,

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48 CBS, Face The Nation, 23 October 1983.
49 Reagan quoted in Wright, 72.
but the limited amount of evidence uncovered made it difficult to retaliate effectively. Islamic Jihad, a relatively unknown terrorist organization at the time, claimed responsibility for the incident. In a phone call to a French news agency in Beirut, an anonymous man announced that the members of the group were “the soldiers of God . . . . We are neither Iranians, Syrians nor Palestinians, but Muslims who follow the precepts of the Koran.”

Terrorist experts soon discovered that Islamic Jihad’s success came from its invisibility, and on more than one occasion, the organization would cripple American policy in the Middle East.

Despite the clandestine nature of the organization who claimed responsibility for the attack, American intelligence indicated that they operated terrorist training camps in the Bekaa Valley. In his memoirs, Reagan explained that he decided not to retaliate because the intelligence information lacked credibility: “Our intelligence experts found it difficult to establish conclusively who was responsible for the attack on the barracks. Although several air strikes were planned against possible culprits, I canceled them because our experts said they were not absolutely sure they were the right targets. I didn’t want to kill innocent people.”

Although such an explanation is obviously self-serving, Reagan’s account is certainly plausible enough. Yet three years later, in April 1986, Reagan ordered an attack on Libya that resulted in civilian casualties. Not surprisingly, some sources have questioned the validity of Reagan’s explanation.

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50 Ibid., 73.
51 Reagan, 463-464.
Journalist Philip Taubman, for instance, published an article in *The New York Times Magazine* in which he asserted that the United States initially planned on joining the French in an air strike. In the article, which appeared in 1985, Taubman claimed that American involvement in the mission "was aborted because the final go-ahead order was not issued in time by the Defense Department." Taubman's findings suggested that Weinberger, not Reagan, blocked the plans for American retribution.

McFarlane has even argued that Weinberger violated a direct order from Reagan to retaliate. After discovering what had happened, he immediately told the president about Weinberger's insubordination. Reagan expressed disappointment after hearing the news. "We should have blown the daylights out of them," he allegedly said, "I just don't understand." Weinberger, of course, vehemently denies McFarlane's story, and although he admits that he received a phone call from the French Minister of Defense on November 16, informing him of an impending retaliatory strike, he claims that Reagan had never issued an order for American participation in the mission. According to Weinberger, "[t]his is another instance when McFarlane’s 'recollections,' well known to be 'flexible,' differed sharply from those of other . . . participants."

It remains unclear why the United States did not join the French in an air strike, and unfortunately, the military documents that could possibly provide an

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54 Reagan quoted in McFarlane, 271; see also Teicher, 265-268; for a good summary of the controversy surrounding the planned retaliatory strike, see Robert Timberg, *The Nightingale's Song* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 337-340.
55 Weinberger, 162.
explanation are, of course, still classified. Although it seems unlikely that Weinberger violated a presidential order, it has been argued that Reagan did approve an attack on the Sheik Abdullah Barracks during a National Security Council meeting on November 14. The heated debate between McFarlane and Weinberger will undoubtedly continue until more sources become available. Yet based on the current evidence, the failure to retaliate reflected Reagan's inability to make important decisions. McFarlane has suggested that the president's poor decisionmaking "was destructive to our Middle East policy, and damaging to other foreign policy initiatives as well." It would be hard for anyone to disagree with McFarlane's conclusions, and as David C. Martin and John Walcott have noted in their analysis of American intervention in Lebanon, "[i]t was no wonder that the staff of the National Security Council later concluded that the best way to serve Reagan was to do his job for him."58

At the beginning of December, an American F-14 on a routine reconnaissance mission over Lebanon came under anti-aircraft fire. Although the plane made it back to the USS Kennedy, one of the carriers stationed on the Lebanese shore, Reagan decided to approve a tactical air strike against Syrian anti-aircraft positions. The strike on December 4 ended in disaster when surface-to-air missiles brought down two planes. One of the pilots had been killed, and Lieutenant Robert Goodman became the prisoner of Syrian soldiers.59 Fortunately for the Reagan administration, Jesse Jackson helped to arrange the

56 Martin and Walcott, 138.
57 McFarlane, 271.
58 Martin and Walcott, 139.
59 Ibid., 140-144.
safe return of Goodman. Overall, the air strike had accomplished almost nothing. The pilots managed to damage some of their targets, but within a few days, the anti-aircraft sites had been successfully repaired. General Vessey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, described the mission as "a Chinese fire drill . . ."60 Once again, Reagan selected a course of action that undermined American objectives in the Middle East. His administration mistakenly believed that they could intimidate Syria with their sophisticated weapons of war, and in the end, this strategy backfired.

Even after the destruction of the Marine barracks, Reagan and his advisers remained committed to the objectives in NSDD 64. On October 28, 1983, five days after the suicide attack, Reagan signed NSDD 111. Much of the document is still classified, but the sections of it open to the public are quite revealing. On the second page, Reagan called for the re-assertion of American leadership in the Middle East "by acting once more in a bold way, especially in the aftermath of the Beirut tragedies."61 More importantly, the president authorized the extension of the rules of engagement on the following page: "The changes [in the ROE] should allow support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), such as that currently authorized for Suq al-Gharb, when in the judgment of the U.S. ground commander, LAF positions controlling strategic arteries to Beirut are in danger of being overrun by hostile forces."62 In essence, NSDD 111 expanded the scope of the addendum to NSDD 103, which had been approved by the president on

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60 Vessey quoted in Ibid., 144.
62 Ibid., 3.
September 11. The Marine commander in Beirut could now authorize air and naval strikes in order to assist the LAF in their attempt to hold the high ground on the outskirts of the city. By providing fire support to the LAF, the United States government was clearly pursuing an offensive strategy. Amazingly, the administration still claimed that the Americans in the multinational force were neutral peacekeepers in the conflict. NSDD 117, for instance, further outlined “a policy of vigorous self-defense” that sought to minimize collateral damage. When the Americans could not retaliate against those responsible for initiating hostile fire without putting civilians lives at risk, NSDD 117 made it permissible to fire on “discrete military targets in unpopulated areas which are organizationally associated with the firing units.”

In theory, NSDD 117 sounded reasonable enough, but in practice, it contributed to some of the most reckless attacks on innocent civilians since the Vietnam War. With its sixteen inch guns, the USS New Jersey was probably the most powerful non-nuclear weapon in the American arsenal at the time. It could fire a 2,700 pound shell several miles, and a single shell had the ability to obliterate an area the size of a square mile. Although the New Jersey reached the coast of Lebanon at the end of September, its powerful guns remained silent during October and November. On December 14, however, the ship unleashed eleven 1,900 pound shells at targets on the ridgeline overlooking Beirut. Despite the immense power of the New Jersey, the ship’s commander did not

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64 Ibid., 1.
have the information that was necessary to fire the guns accurately. The navy would normally rely on field reporting when positioning their weapons, but given the widespread violence on the ground, reconnaissance teams were not dispatched. To make matters even worse, the ammunition used for the sixteen inch guns was at least thirty years old, which further reduced the accuracy and effectiveness of the shelling.66

The longer the Marines remained in Beirut, the more desperate the situation became. Eight Marines had been killed during a fire fight in early December, and another died in January. As the violence continued, the American public turned against the Reagan administration's policy in Lebanon. Only 37% of Americans favored the withdrawal of Marines from the country in October, but by the end of January, 58% believed that it was time for the mission to end.67 Congress, of course, listened to the polls and began to put pressure on the administration. Despite the rising opposition, Reagan re-iterated his commitment to Lebanon on numerous occasions. The National Security Council even prepared an informational packet for the administration that could be distributed to Republicans in Congress. In essence, the packet was supposed to assist Reagan's supporters explain and defend American objectives in Lebanon to their constituents. Describing the country as "a flash point of confrontation between Israel and Syria, and potentially between the U.S. and USSR," the NSC


document claimed that the “U.S. cannot ignore [the] consequences of just walking away.” The Congressional packet, in other words, claimed that Lebanon was vital to America’s national security and credibility.

If Lebanon was truly so important to American interests, however, President Reagan would have never approved National Security Decision Directive 123 ("Next Steps in Lebanon") on February 1, 1984. NSDD 123 began with an outline of the three major military problems facing the Lebanese government, and it called for the military to provide more weapons and training to the LAF. By increasing aid to Gemayel’s government, the decision directive suggested that the United States was simply continuing earlier policies. Yet on the second page of NSDD 123, Reagan ordered Weinberger and Vessey to construct a “timetable for the phase down of USMNF military personnel ashore and a plan for the continuing U.S. military presence offshore, taking full account of political as well as military considerations.” Removing the Marines from the Beirut Airport and transferring them to nearby ships represented a major shift in policy. Although Reagan did not authorize the phase down of the military mission on February 1, he clearly was searching for a way out. Reagan, like Richard Nixon, wanted peace with honor; unlike Nixon, however, Reagan grew tired of waiting.

Despite what was happening behind the scenes, Reagan made public statements that were obviously misleading. On February 4, during a radio

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address from Camp David, he explained to Americans why the United States needed to uphold its commitment to the government of Lebanon: "Yes, the situation in Lebanon is difficult, frustrating and dangerous. But that is no reason to turn our backs and to cut and run. If we do, we'll be sending one signal to terrorists everywhere. They can gain by waging war against innocent people." 70

Three days later, while Reagan was making an appearance in Las Vegas, Vice President George Bush convened a meeting of the National Security Planning Group. Gemayel had lost control of West Beirut; Congress was demanding that the White House change its strategy; and even McFarlane now believed that the United States needed to withdraw. Interestingly, Secretary of State Shultz did not attend the NSPG meeting, since he had gone to Grenada, which had been invaded by American forces on October 25. Shultz's representative at the meeting, Lawrence Eagleburger, opposed the Marine withdrawal, but everyone else, including Bush, supported the proposal. Bush then called Reagan, who was now getting ready to leave for his California ranch on Air Force One, and informed the president what had transpired at the meeting. Reagan simply concurred with Bush and hung up the phone. 71 As Lou Cannon has observed, Reagan authorized the withdrawal "in a phone conversation even briefer than the one in which he had originally authorized [Philip] Habib to commit the United States to participate in the MNF." 72

On February 6, President Reagan had written a poignant letter to John Wandell. Wandell, a young sailor on the USS Guam, was stationed within

70 Reagan quoted in Cannon, 398.
71 Martin and Walcott, 150; Cannon, 399-400.
72 Cannon, 400.
striking distance of Lebanon at the time. Responding to an earlier note from Wandell, Reagan reminded him that "[w]e must not abandon those who have relied on our help to build a just and lasting peace."73 By the time the letter reached its destination, Reagan had completely reversed his position. Administration officials claimed that the removal of American forces from the airport amounted to a re-deployment in which the United States would continue to assist the Lebanese government with the navy ships stationed offshore. In reality, though, everyone seemed to recognize that re-deployment was nothing more than a euphemism for the decision to cut and run.

Donald Rumsfeld, who had replaced McFarlane as the United States envoy to the Middle East, received the difficult task of informing Gemayel that the Marines were leaving the country. Rumsfeld and his staff armed themselves with handguns and made their way to Gemayel's personal bunker at the presidential palace. Since Rumsfeld had earlier promised Gemayel that the United States would not abandon Lebanon, he expected that the news would surprise him. Yet Gemayel reacted calmly to the visit, asking questions but not protesting. Rumsfeld later explained his deep sense of embarrassment at the meeting; "I just felt terrible," he said, "I felt sick to my stomach."74

The Reagan administration, however, was not entirely finished with Lebanon. In what was perhaps the most vindictive display of military power since the Christmas bombings during the Vietnam War, the New Jersey fired 288 sixteen inch shells at targets outside of Beirut on February 8, and on the

73 Reagan quoted in Wright, 97.
74 Rumsfeld quoted in Martin and Walcott, 151.
following day, an American destroyer unleashed over one hundred rounds. Walid Jumblatt, the architect of the National Salvation Front, initially claimed that the village of Tebyat had been annihilated. Journalists soon discovered that Jumblatt’s report was exaggerated, but they also found evidence to indicate that the shelling had spread into civilian areas. In Tebyat, for instance, a sixteen inch shell from the New Jersey killed two and wounded sixteen. One resident of Tebyat questioned why the United States had targeted the village; “We have no terrorists here, we have no Palestinians here,” he said. Unfortunately, it remains unclear how much damage the shelling inflicted on the civilian population. Although Druze leaders certainly had the tendency to overestimate the number of casualties, it is also clear that non-combatants were killed and wounded as a result of American naval fire. At the time, anonymous sources inside the Pentagon said that the shells “hit nothing of military significance,” and Michael Burch, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, admitted that “there may have been some [collateral damage] and that would be unfortunate.”

The final contingent of Marines withdrew from Lebanon at 12:37 in the afternoon on February 26. Shortly before leaving on a personnel carrier, Lance

Corporal Shawn Lamb described how it felt to have served in Beirut. "You have any good friends?" he asked reporter Thomas Friedman. "How would you like to have them blown up in their sleep a thousand miles from home in a foreign country—for nothing?" Although some Marines stayed behind to protect the American embassy and Army personnel continued to train the LAF, United States involvement in the multinational force was now over. Within a few minutes of the American departure, gunmen moved into the area surrounding the airport and raised a green Amal flag where an American flag had once flown. The men searched the former Marine headquarters, expressed some interest in discarded *Playboy* magazines, and proceeded to secure the airport's runways.

While the gunmen took control of the airport, the *New Jersey* and the *Caron*, a destroyer, blasted their guns at the high ground over Beirut. The 66 rounds fired on February 26 marked the senseless ending to a senseless foreign policy in which nothing was gained and so much was lost. Perhaps a poem written on the door frame of a Marine bunker at the airport summarized it best:

*They sent us to Beirut*  
*To be targets who could not shoot.*  
*Friends will die into an early grave,*  
*Was there any reason for what they gave?*

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80 Ibid., A6.  
81 Ibid., A1.  
82 Friedman, "America's Failure In Lebanon," 32.
On June 14, 1985, over a year after the United States withdrew from Lebanon, TWA Flight 847 took off from Athens with 153 people on board. Carrying 135 American passengers on their way to Rome, the plane was soon hijacked by two members of Hezbollah. Most of the American hostages did not understand why the enraged gunmen repeatedly yelled the words “New Jersey” and “Marines.”\(^2\) As the episode unfolded, however, the references to American involvement in Lebanon gradually became more clear. The lead hijacker, who the passengers nicknamed Castro, declared at one point that his wife and child had been killed by bombs from the United States.\(^3\) The hijackers extensively beat navy diver Robert Stethem, shot him, and then dumped his body onto the runway in Beirut. They defended their action to the Beirut air traffic controller by reminding him of the Bir al Abed massacre in which the CIA allegedly organized a car bomb attack on Sheik Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah. The explosion in March 1985 had killed eighty Lebanese civilians but Fadlallah survived.\(^4\)

The hijackers shuttled their hostages between Beirut and Algiers for four days before they finally abandoned the aircraft in Beirut. When they evacuated the plane, they released almost all of the remaining hostages to the Amal militia.

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\(^1\) Martin and Walcott, 148.
\(^2\) Cannon, 536.
\(^3\) Martin and Walcott, 173.
\(^4\) Cannon, 536.
Thomas Murry, one of the Americans on TWA Flight 847, later recalled that the final group of prisoners were taken in groups to apartments in south Beirut. The Amal guards took Murry and the other hostages to locations that had been attacked by the USS New Jersey in 1984, and on many occasions, they attempted to explain to their captives why ordinary people resorted to terrorism. According to a guard named Akal, for instance, the United States was directly involved in the creation of international terrorism:

Think about a young man in southern Lebanon, a Shiite, who [is a] poor farmer. And he’s out in the fields working. And some of these Palestinians come in town and launch a rocket attack at the Israelis. The Israelis shoot back and [the] Palestinians are gone. And he gets home to find his family dead. And here is shell casings stuffed with American markings on it. And he’s standing there looking at that, and a radical comes up and pats him on the shoulder and says, ‘I’ll show you how to get even.’ And you’ve got [yourself a] terrorist.⁵

Akal, of course, definitely oversimplified the causes of terrorism, but in retrospect, his observations are historically accurate, since much of the terrorist activity directed at the United States during the Reagan years could be traced back to American intervention in Lebanon between 1982 and 1984.

After the TWA Flight 847 hostages were released on June 30, Reagan went on national television to declare war on terrorism. “The United States gives terrorists no rewards and no guarantees,” he said. “We make no concessions; we make no deals. Nations that harbor terrorists undermine their own stability and endanger their own people. Terrorists, be on notice, we will fight back

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against you, in Lebanon and elsewhere." 6 The Americans who listened to this speech did not know that their president had arranged the return of the hostages by promising the release of Shiite prisoners held in Israel. They also did not realize that high ranking officials within his administration were already working on a secret deal with Iran to get back the seven American citizens who had been kidnapped in Lebanon over the previous eighteen months.

As his predecessors had learned in Korea and Vietnam, and as Bill Clinton would later discover in Somalia, Lebanon taught Reagan that there were limits to America's military hegemony. Even the New Jersey, with its massive guns, could not stop hostile factions from killing and wounding Marines in Beirut. Rather than focusing attention on diplomatic solutions to the Lebanese crisis, Reagan, like Lyndon Johnson, believed that a military presence would somehow lead to a peaceful resolution. He repeatedly claimed that the United States would not abandon the Lebanese people. In fact, whenever Reagan commented on America's commitment to Lebanon, Beirut newspapers would frequently print the story on the first page. Not surprisingly, many people in Lebanon assumed that the United States would stand by these promises. Reagan's rhetoric, which routinely appeared in the newspapers and on the radio, gave them renewed confidence in the future of their country. "I thought the Americans had it all planned out and nothing could go wrong," recalled Nabil Yacoub. "They kept talking about all their plans and commitments. We thought there would be a new order in Lebanon patroned by the United States." 7 Much to Yacoub's

7 Yacoub quoted in Friedman, From Beirut To Jerusalem, 208.
disappointment, however, Reagan abandoned Lebanon and did nothing to help when the country began to disintegrate.

While the withdrawal of the Marines in 1984 disillusioned supporters of the United States like Yacoub, enemies of America had much to celebrate. International terrorists learned from October 23 that one successful truck bomb had the ability to completely reverse American foreign policy, and in the aftermath of the deadly blast, it became apparent to them that Reagan’s promise of swift and effective retribution had been transformed into a policy of inaction and retreat. “The message to them was clear,” Jeffrey Simon has written, “[h]ijack the right plane at the right moment, or perpetrate some other dramatic attack, and you can bring the president of the most powerful nation in the world to address you and take notice of you.” 8 Sadly, the Reagan administration missed an excellent opportunity to deter future terrorist attacks. The Long Commission, which investigated the barracks attack for the Department of Defense, assigned principal responsibility for the incident to the Marine commanders on the ground. At the same time, however, the Long Report warned that the United States was shockingly unprepared to confront international terrorism. The commission reminded policy makers “that state sponsored terrorism is an important part of the spectrum of warfare and that adequate response to this increasing threat requires an active national policy which seeks to deter attack or reduce its effectiveness.” 9 While recommending that the military place more emphasis on counter-terrorism, the report also

8 Simon, 193.
outlined the need for diplomatic and political initiatives to address the problem.

The Reagan administration responded to the recommendations embodied in the Long Report, and on April 3, 1984, Reagan approved National Security Decision Directive 138. NSDD 138, which was primarily written by Oliver North, provided a blueprint for Reagan's war on terrorism. According to the decision directive, terrorism constituted a direct threat to the national security of the United States. Whenever terrorist groups attacked Americans, it called for the United States government to strike back at the perpetrators. Yet in the words of Noel Koch, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense, NSDD 138 "was simply ignored. No part of it was ever implemented."10 Frustrated with Reagan's failure to implement NSDD 138, Shultz turned to the American public. In numerous speeches and interviews, he warned that terrorism would only escalate in the years to come, and as a consequence, he said that the United States needed to take the offensive. "We can expect more terrorism directed at our strategic interests around the world in the years ahead," he told an audience gathered at the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York. "To combat it, we must be willing to use military force."11

Not surprisingly, Weinberger disagreed with Shultz's approach to the situation. In September 1984, a van loaded with explosives drove into the American embassy annex in East Beirut, killing two Americans and twelve Lebanese. Although the CIA traced the attack to the Sheik Abdullah Barracks, Weinberger successfully blocked plans for a retaliatory mission.12 He believed

10 Koch quoted in Martin and Walcott, 157.
11 Shultz quoted in Simon, 181.
12 Martin and Walcott, 158-159.
that military force should be used with utmost caution. In November 1984, during a speech at the National Press Club, Weinberger outlined a set of principles that are now commonly referred to as the Weinberger Doctrine. Weinberger maintained that the United States should only use military intervention in situations where American interests were threatened and when the objectives were clearly defined and achievable. He emphasized that leaders must not commit American troops unless they had the support of the nation.13

In essence, the ongoing feud between Weinberger and Shultz hampered the administration’s ability to effectively implement a coherent policy on terrorism. Despite their many disagreements, however, they both viewed the problem from a military perspective. The fundamental argument, in other words, pertained to the issue of retaliation. Shultz believed that the United States had an obligation to fight back, while Weinberger thought that counter-offensives were a reckless waste of resources. The Reagan years were a formative time for international terrorism, and unfortunately, no one in the White House took a proactive stance on the issue. If the government of the United States had done more to carefully evaluate the causes of terrorism, it would have better equipped itself to alter the subsequent course of events. In the final analysis, America failed to take the initiative on counter-terrorism during the 1980s. Many officials were responsible for this failure, but none more so than Reagan himself. Howard Teicher, who worked for the National Security Council under Reagan, has provided one of the more revealing assessments of his boss. “Because he was unwilling to exercise leadership or to enforce discipline

13 Simon, 184.
within his own cabinet," according to Teicher, "history will judge Ronald Reagan a weak and indecisive man."\(^{14}\)

From beginning to end, American intervention in Lebanon was indicative of that weakness and indecision.

\(^{14}\) Teicher quoted in Martin and Walcott, 160.
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Ph.D. Dissertations


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