

From Beirut to 9/11

Contributed by ROBERT C. McFARLANE
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IN the summer of 1983, I became President Ronald Reagan's special representative to the Middle East, with the mission of restoring a measure of calm to Israel's relations with her neighbors, starting with Lebanon. At the time, Lebanon was occupied by Syrian and Israeli forces — Syria since shortly after Lebanon's civil war began in 1975, and Israel since its invasion in June of the previous year.

Scarcely three months into that assignment, however, I was recalled to Washington and named the president's national security adviser. Just after midnight on Friday, Oct. 21, I was awakened by a call from Vice President George H. W. Bush, who reported that several East Caribbean states had asked the United States to send forces to the Caribbean island of Grenada to prevent the Soviet Union and Cuba from establishing a base there. I called the president and Secretary of State George Shultz, who were on a golfing trip in Augusta, Ga., and received approval to have our forces prepare to land within 72 hours.

Then, less than 24 hours later I was awakened again, this time by the duty officer at the White House situation room, who reported that United States Marine barracks in Lebanon had been attacked by Iranian-trained Hezbollah terrorists with heavy losses. Again, I called the president, and he prepared for an immediate return to Washington to deal with both crises.

Today is the 25th anniversary of that bombing, which killed 241 Americans who were part of a multinational peacekeeping force (a simultaneous attack on the French base killed 58 paratroopers). The attack was planned over several months at Hezbollah's training camp in the Bekaa Valley in central Lebanon. Once American intelligence confirmed who was responsible and where the attack had been planned, President Reagan approved a joint French-American air assault on the camp — only to have the mission aborted just before launching by the secretary of defense, Caspar Weinberger. Four months later, all the marines were withdrawn, capping one of the most tragic and costly policy defeats in the brief modern history of American counterterrorism operations.

One could draw several conclusions from this episode. To me the most telling was the one reached by Middle Eastern terrorists, that the United States had neither the will nor the means to respond effectively to a terrorist attack, a conclusion seemingly borne out by our fecklessness toward terrorist attacks in the 1990s: in 1993 on the World Trade Center; on Air Force troops at Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia in 1996; on our embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998; on the destroyer Cole in 2000.

There was no effective response from the United States to any of these. It was not until the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, that our country decided to go to war against radical Islam.

A second conclusion concerns the age-old maxim never to deploy a force without giving it a clear military mission. In 1983, the Marine battalion positioned at the Beirut Airport was assigned the mission of "presence"; that is, to lend moral support to the fragile Lebanese government. Secretary of State Shultz and I urged the president to give the marines their traditional role — to deploy, at the invitation of the Lebanese government, into the mountains alongside the newly established Lebanese Army in an effort to secure the evacuation of Syrian and Israeli forces from Lebanon.

Secretary Weinberger disagreed. He felt strongly that American interests in the Middle East lay primarily in the region's oil, and that to assure access to that oil we ought never to undertake military operations that might result in Muslim casualties and put at risk Muslim goodwill.

Cabinet officers often disagree, and rigorous debate and refinement often lead to better policy. What is intolerable, however, is irresolution. In this case the president allowed the refusal by his secretary of defense to carry out a direct order to go by without comment — an event which could have seemed to Mr. Weinberger only a vindication of his judgment. Faced with the persistent refusal of his secretary of defense to countenance a more active role for the marines, the president withdrew them, sending the terrorists a powerful signal of paralysis within our government and missing an early opportunity to counter the Islamist terrorist threat in its infancy.

Since 9/11 we have learned a lot about the threat from radical Islam and how to defeat it. Our commitment to Iraq is now being vindicated and, if sustained, will enable us to establish an example of pluralism in a Muslim state with a flourishing economy.

First, however, we must win in Afghanistan — truly the decisive battleground in this global struggle. Never has

there been a greater need for experience and judgment in the White House. Unless our next president understands the complexity of the challenge as well as what it will take to succeed, and can lead his cabinet and our country in resolute execution of that strategy, we will lose this war.

Robert C. McFarlane was the national security adviser from 1983 to 1985.