WHEN DO LEADERS CHANGE COURSE? THEORIES OF SUCCESS AND THE AMERICAN WITHDRAWAL FROM BEIRUT, 1983–1984

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Why did the United States withdraw from Lebanon in February 1984? How did new information shape policymakers' proposals to expand, maintain, or terminate the intervention? Drawing upon declassified records, we challenge the conventional narrative that the October 1983 barracks bombing precipitated the American withdrawal from Beirut. Rather than encouraging a consensus around the need to terminate the mission, the significant casualties strengthened senior leaders' determination to stay the course and deepened the divisions within the Reagan administration. Ultimately, only the collapse of the Lebanese national army in early February 1984 — an event unrelated to the October truck attack — forced the intervention's advocates to adjust their expectations for the mission's success and compelled Ronald Reagan to order the Marines' redeployment. By demonstrating the durability of established theories of success and their effect on the interpretation of new information, this history of the Reagan administration's deliberations over the winter of 1983–84 provides insight into presidential decision-making and contributes to our understanding of elite support for costly but limited U.S. military interventions.

A crowd gathered on the shores of Beirut's Green Beach on Feb. 26, 1984 to watch as the last company of U.S. Marines departed from Lebanon. Remnants of a 1,800-strong peacekeeping mission, the Marines had arrived 18 months earlier to help restore stability and encourage the withdrawal of Israeli and Syrian forces from the country. The Reagan administration maintained that the peacekeepers' presence was vital to national reconciliation and ending Lebanon's civil war, and their operations had steadily expanded as the security situation in the country deteriorated. Then, on Oct. 23, 1983, a suicide bomber affiliated with a pro-Iranian Shia faction detonated his truck within the Marine barracks at Beirut International Airport, killing 241 Americans.[1] The memory of the attack hung over the troops four months later, and their redeployment was widely seen as a retreat. "No more wounded, no more killed," one gunnery sergeant explained to a *New York Times* reporter, summarizing the prevailing sentiment. "All these

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1   A near-simultaneous attack on the French military headquarters in Beirut would bring the day's death toll to 299. For a description of the attack, see: Benis M. Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon, 1982–1984* (Washington, DC: History & Museums Division, U.S. Marine Corps, 1987), 1–3, 93–96; Timothy J. Geraghty, *Peacekeepers at War: Beirut 1983–The Marine Commander Tells His Story* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2012), 91–95.

people want us to do is go home."[2]

Nearly three decades later, the image of the withdrawing marines has been fixed in the minds of academics, policymakers, and the general public alike as an integral element of the popular refrain that U.S. foreign policy is constrained by an extreme sensitivity to casualties.[3] Like the Nixon administration in Vietnam and the Clinton administration in Somalia, the argument goes, the Reagan administration was driven from Lebanon because policymakers feared the political repercussions of mounting losses. More generally, scholars still differ over whether the withdrawal was a shrewd political calculation designed to safeguard the president's re-election chances, an impulsive reaction to a human tragedy, or a strategic course correction that foreshadowed Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger's eponymous doctrine on the use of force. But they all agree, as Israeli historian Benny Morris writes, that the "massive loss of life ... instantly broke Washington's resolve."[4]

Yet, these conventional arguments cannot explain the timing or the character of the U.S. departure from Lebanon. In fact, they obscure more than illuminate how policymakers responded to an unanticipated high-casualty event. Drawing upon newly accessible government records, this article argues that the Beirut barracks bombing did not, as is widely believed, precipitate a decision to withdraw. Although the attack strengthened a pre-existing movement for withdrawal, it did the same for a second, more influential faction within the administration that pushed successfully for an expansion and hardening of U.S. military involvement in Lebanon even as popular and congressional opposition to the intervention mounted. Ultimately, only the collapse of the Lebanese national army in early February 1984 — an event unrelated to the October truck attack — compelled Ronald Reagan to accept the mission's

failure and order the marines to redeploy.

Our findings imply that policymakers' responses to casualties are conditioned by their existing theories about an operation's probability of success or failure. We find that individual policymakers who already opposed the U.S. intervention in Lebanon interpreted the violence of the barracks attack as evidence for their previously established views on the feasibility (or infeasibility) of the peacekeeping mission. Similarly, the attack hardened the position of intervention advocates, who continued to push for an expansion in U.S. military involvement despite the mounting human and political danger. In both instances, public attitudes toward the intervention did not determine policymakers' support for expanding, maintaining, or terminating the peacekeeping mission. We therefore conclude that the barracks bombing was not the determining factor in the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon as many have presumed. Rather than lend clarity about the appropriate course of action, the bombing heightened divisions within the administration as policymakers integrated the attack into their pre-existing but competing theories of success (or failure) of the Lebanon mission.

This article addresses two related questions: First, why did the United States withdraw from Lebanon? Second, and more broadly, how did policymakers use new information from Beirut in decisions about expanding, maintaining, or terminating the intervention? The opening two sections briefly survey the literature on the relationship between casualties, public opinion, and U.S. foreign policy, highlighting how elite decision-makers weigh public pressure and interpret new information from the field when considering withdrawal from limited military interventions. The third section details alternative explanations for the U.S. response to the barracks bombing. Next, we outline the counterfactual method we employ to identify,

2   Michael Kennedy, "U.S. Shelves New Aid for Lebanon: Last Marines Leave Beirut for Safety of Ships," Feb. 27, 1984, *Los Angeles Times*.

3   Surveying the literature on U.S. casualty sensitivity, Louis Klarevas notes that the concept of public opinion as the "'essential domino' of American foreign policy took on a more permanent and overt cast" after the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon. See: "The 'Essential Domino' of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspectives* 3, no. 4 (2002): 418–19, https://doi.org/10.1111/1528-3577.t01-1-00107.

4   Benny Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881–2001*, Reprint (New York: Vintage, 2001), 552. See also: Charles F. Brower IV, "Stranger in a Dangerous Land: Reagan and Lebanon, 1981–1984," in *Reagan and the World: Leadership and National Security 1981–1989*, ed. Bradley Lynn Coleman and Kyle Longley (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 238, 256–87; David C. Brooks, "Cutting Losses: Ending Limited Interventions," *Parameters* 43, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 102–03, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Autumn_2013/9_Brooks.pdf; Gail E.S. Yoshitani, *Reagan on War: A Reappraisal of the Weinberger Doctrine, 1980–1984* (Texas A&M University Press, 2011); Robert Timberg, *The Nightingale's Song* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 342–44; H.W. Brands, *Into the Labyrinth: The United States and the Middle East, 1945–1993* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994); Robert J. Lieber, "The Middle East," in *Looking Back on the Reagan Presidency*, ed. Larry Berman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 50–70; Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016), 73–75. For domestic political explanations, see: William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict Since 1967*, 3rd ed. (Brookings Institution Press and University of California Press, 2005), 259; Peter L. Hahn, *Crisis and Crossfire: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005), 80; William B. Quandt, "Reagan's Lebanon Policy: Trial and Error," *Middle East Journal* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1984): 237–54, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4326797. This argument was disseminated widely at the time as well. See: Francis X. Clines, "James Baker: Calling Reagan's Re-Election Moves," March 20, 1984, *New York Times*. Douglas Kriner's work is a rare exception in that he acknowledges the administration's intention to expand, rather than retract, U.S. involvement in the wake of the bombing. See: Douglas L. Kriner, *After the Rubicon: Congress, Presidents, and the Politics of Waging War* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 193–231.

construct, and assess alternative causal pathways for explaining the withdrawal. A brief history of the U.S. military withdrawal from Lebanon constitutes the fifth section, followed by a counterfactual assessment to test our theory and assess American decision-makers' calculations between the October 1983 bombing and the Marines' departure in February 1984. Finally, the conclusion returns to the question of why the Reagan administration terminated the peacekeeping mission and considers the implications this case has on popular, scholarly, and policy debates about military withdrawals.

Weighing the "Bodybag Effect"[5]

The history of the Reagan administration's intervention in Lebanon has played a fundamental role in shaping popular and academic attitudes toward the effect that casualties have had on U.S. foreign policy and the role of public opinion in crafting that policy. The barracks bombing was the U.S. military's first major casualty event since the end of the Vietnam War, and for some it played into a growing literature highlighting the public's power to curtail military commitments when confronted with evidence of growing human costs.[6] Weinberger's 1984 announcement of a new military doctrine defining, among other criteria, the need for "reasonable assurances" of public support for future interventions seemed to provide additional confirmation of this thesis. Media and academic discourses about Lebanon conform closely with the theory that the barracks bombing catalyzed the Marines' departure.[7]

Three decades later, Beirut remains a popular case study of the effects of casualties on U.S. foreign policy, contributing to a vast literature that frames public opinion as the "essential domino" in decisions to maintain, expand, or terminate

5   Lawrence Freedman, "Victims and Victors: Reflections on the Kosovo War," *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 3 (2000): 338, http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500003351.

6   John E. Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 2 (June 1971): 358–75, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1954454; Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973); Jeffrey Milstein, "The Vietnam War from the 1968 Tet Offensive to the 1970 Cambodian Invasion," in *Mathematical Approaches to Politics*, ed. H.R. Alker Jr., K.W. Deutsch and A.H. Stoetzel (New York: Elsevier Scientific, 1973); Klarevas, "The 'Essential Domino' of Military Operations," 418–19.

7   For recent illustrative examples in the public discourse, see: Peter Beinart, "Think Again: Ronald Reagan," *Foreign Policy*, June 7, 2010, https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/06/07/think-again-ronald-reagan/; Micah Zenko, "When Reagan Cut and Run," *Foreign Policy*, Feb. 7, 2014, https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/02/07/when-reagan-cut-and-run/; Anthony Elghossain, "The Unlearned Lessons of the Beirut Barracks Bombing," *New Republic*, Nov. 7, 2018, https://newrepublic.com/article/152071/unlearned-lessons-beirut-barracks-bombing.

military interventions.[8] In one camp, scholars have expanded upon John Mueller's landmark theory of a reflexive and casualty-sensitive American electorate, contending that popular support for an intervention declines — and the risk of political backlash grows — as the costs of an intervention accumulate.[9] Conversely, a second school of thought emphasizes the public's capacity to make rational calculations and weigh the costs of an intervention against its perceived strategic importance and the odds of success. Informed by the United States' post-Cold War humanitarian operations and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, this literature suggests that a variety of contextual factors, including the type of operation, elite framing of the conflict, and the perceived probability of victory, help inform the public's tolerance for casualties and provide opportunities for decision-makers to sustain costly interventions under certain circumstances.[10]

Both views are united, however, by the common position that popular attitudes function as a strong brake on the use of force.[11] If the public is willing to punish elected leaders for the costs of a military intervention, the argument goes, U.S. presidential administrations can be expected, once presented with evidence of declining popular support, to terminate interventions in hopes of avoiding an electoral backlash. The Beirut example has emerged as a common demonstration of this dynamic. Researchers have seized upon the fact that the Reagan administration announced its withdrawal shortly after the president formally declared his intention to run for re-election.

Yet, the complete history of the U.S. experience in Lebanon challenges both of these public opinion models. Closer analysis of public and White House polling data reveals that national attitudes did not decline uniformly in response to the barracks attack. To the contrary, support for the U.S. intervention in Lebanon *grew* in the wake of the bombing and continued to fluctuate over the intervention's remaining four months. Even as public attitudes

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8   Klarevas, "The 'Essential Domino' of Military Operations," 418–19.

9   See, for instance: Edward N. Luttwak, "Where Are the Great Powers?" *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 4 (July/August 1994): 23–28, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1994-07-01/where-are-great-powers-home-kids; "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3, (May/June 1995): 109–22, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/yugoslavia/1995-05-01/toward-post-heroic-warfare; and "A Post-Heroic Military Policy: The New Season of Bellicosity," *Foreign Affairs* 75, no. 4 (July/August 1996): 33–44, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-america/1996-07-01/post-heroic-military-policy-new-season-bellicosity; John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November/December 2005), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2005-10-01/iraq-syndrome.

10   Although the scope and emphasis varies across theories, the notion of a deliberative and discerning American public underlines each of the following: Eugene R. Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990); Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (March 1992): 49–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/2600916; John Z. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Alvin Richman, "When Should We Be Prepared to Fight?" *Public Perspective* 6, no. 3 (April/May 1995): 44; Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 4 (August 1998): 395–417, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002798042004001; Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/06): 7–46, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2005.30.3.7; Scott Sigmund Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (February 2008): 95–106, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27644500; Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). For the role of political elites and the media in shaping popular attitudes, see: James Burk, "Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia: Assessing the Casualties Hypothesis," *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no.1 (Spring 1999): 53–78, https://doi.org/10.2307/2657991; William A. Boettcher and Michael D. Cobb, "Echoes of Vietnam? Casualty Framing and Public Perceptions of Success and Failure in Iraq," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 6 (December 2006): 831–54, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002706293665; Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (November 2007): 975–97, http://web.mit.edu/berinsky/www/war.pdf; Scott S. Gartner, "On Behalf of a Grateful Nation: Conventionalized Images of Loss and Individual Opinion Change in War," *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (June 2011): 545–61, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23019702; Matthew A. Baum and Philip B.K. Potter, *War and Democratic Constraint: How the Public Influences Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Alexandra Guisinger and Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Mapping the Boundaries of Elite Cues: How Elites Shape Mass Opinion Across International Issues," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (2017): 425–41, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx022.

11   Because of the character of the U.S. intervention in Lebanon, in which the debate concentrated on casualties rather than lost treasure, we evaluate only the impact of human losses. For a theory of public responses to financial costs, see: Benny Geys, "Wars, Presidents, and Popularity: The Political Cost(s) of War Re-Examined," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 357–74, https://dx.doi.org/nfq001.

soured over the winter of 1983–84, the decline in support was neither as precipitous as is commonly argued nor as influential. Indeed, when the White House announced its decision to withdraw in early February 1984, public support for the intervention was "not significantly different from what it was in early October 1983, before the truck bombing occurred."[12] Moreover, the Reagan administration continued to expand and harden U.S. military involvement in Lebanon for several months after the tragedy, even as the perceived danger of future losses increased. Rather than distance himself from a growing political liability — as both the reflexive and rational public models anticipate a savvy political leader would do — the president vociferously defended the intervention both in public and private. And even as the announcement of his re-election campaign neared, and despite worsening poll numbers, Reagan continued to tie himself to the imbroglio.

Weighing a Strategic Course Correction

A second popular interpretation of the withdrawal from Lebanon upholds the case as a rare example of prudent course correction. Skeptical of the peacekeeping mission, those subscribing to this explanation argue that the bombing forced Reagan to acknowledge that the costs of maintaining the intervention outweighed the anticipated benefits. Avoiding the temptation to double down on a losing mission, the president chose to cut his losses and terminate the mission before additional American lives were lost.[13]

This view hews closely to theoretical arguments within the literature on bargaining models of war, especially notions of Bayesian updating.[14] Such updating occurs when rational political actors combine new information from the field with prior expectations to adjust their outlooks on the future. In the context of a military operation, positive information like a battlefield success might encourage policymakers, governments, or populations to expand their political objectives or to adjust their strategy to seek desired ends more efficiently. If new information suggests that an adversary is stronger than expected or that the costs of success are higher than anticipated — a devastating attack on one's military forces, for example — decision-makers should narrow their objectives and begin seeking an end to the operation. These calculations depend largely on the actor's prior assessments; even the most damning information from the battlefield may only slowly overcome deeply held expectations that events will ultimately work out as originally anticipated.[15] Nonetheless, a Bayesian perspective suggests that new negative information from the field should reliably and consistently degrade expectations for, and thus approaches to, an intervention.

At first glance, this framework provides an appealingly simple explanation for the Reagan administration's behavior in the wake of the Beirut barracks bombing: Since the cost of the intervention — namely, the loss of 241 Americans — and the expectation of future attacks exceeded the benefits of maintaining the mission, withdrawal was consequently in order. A surprise injection of negative information from the field precipitated careful strategic reassessment.

Yet, a closer examination of the Reagan administration's deliberations reveals that policymakers did not uniformly interpret the attack and update their expectations as the Bayesian model might predict. Instead, officials retreated into their pre-established camps and offered two diverging understandings of the tragedy's significance. Opponents of the U.S.

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12   Burk, "Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia," 65–67. Here, we expand upon Burk and Douglas Kriner's earlier work, which used public polling and survey data, by evaluating polling data and reports commissioned by the White House, Reagan's re-election campaign team, and the Republican National Committee. These are available in boxes 685 and 687 of the Edwin Meese collection at the Hoover Institution Library and Archives in Stanford, California. See also: Kriner, *After the Rubicon*, 193–231.

13   Aspects of this argument are reflected in: Beinart, "Think Again: Ronald Reagan"; Zenko, "When Reagan Cut and Run."

14   For a useful overview of the logic behind bargaining models of war and their reliance on the logic of Bayesian updating, see: Dan Reiter, "Exploring the Bargaining Model of War," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 1 (2003): 27–43, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3687811; James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379–414, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2706903. Relevant to our argument, recent research has adopted Bayesian models focused on different political actors updating expectations as they relate to war termination. See: Sarah E. Croco, *Peace at What Price? Leader Culpability and the Domestic Politics of War Termination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Elizabeth A. Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination, and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Dan Reiter, *How Wars End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

15   On this point, see: Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, New Edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), xlvii–lii. Related work by Jeffrey Friedman suggests that political actors rationally may stick to their military approach despite negative battlefield information if this information is consistent with their initial expectations. If a president expects to incur significant casualties before ultimately achieving success, then the realization of those casualties should not necessarily dissuade him from pressing on. Still, this requires an actor to hold a consistent set of expectations, present at the start of an intervention and maintained throughout, and the theory does not refute the need for consistent evaluation of new information. See: Jeffrey Friedman, "Cumulative Dynamics and Strategic Assessment: U.S. Military Decision Making in Iraq, Vietnam, and the American Indian Wars" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013).

military intervention, notably Defense Secretary Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John W. Vessey Jr., seized upon the Marine losses as a confirmation of their prior belief that U.S. objectives in Lebanon could not be achieved at an acceptable cost. Most interestingly, however, advocates of the intervention drew the inverse conclusion, construing the bloodshed as evidence that the U.S. military presence was vital to preserving hopes for a negotiated settlement to the Lebanese civil war. President Reagan, Secretary of State George Shultz, and National Security Adviser Robert "Bud" McFarlane each upheld the bombing as an additional reason to maintain — or even expand — U.S. involvement in the country and reassert Washington's resolve.[16] Reagan reassured the American people that "The multinational force was attacked precisely because it is ... accomplishing its mission."[17]

If neither pressure from a casualty-adverse public nor reflexive strategic reassessment explains the Reagan administration's reaction to the bombing and the decision-making surrounding the ultimate withdrawal, what does?

Theories of Success, Theories of Failure

The divergent interpretations of the bombing were largely conditioned on policymakers' previous beliefs regarding the efficacy and value of the U.S. intervention in Lebanon. We call these views their "theory of success" or "theory of failure." We use theory of success and theory of failure in reference to the causal logic underpinning why a particular action is expected to lead, or not lead, to a desired political objective.[18] Beliefs of this kind animate each facet of policymakers' deliberations — including definition of priorities, assessment of risk, and evaluation of potential instruments of power — by providing a unifying framework to bind specific decisions to more general political aims.[19] Functionally, theories of success determine the shape of action, providing the sinew connecting a

government's efforts with its goals.

In the case of the U.S. intervention in Lebanon, policymakers' established theories of success or failure informed their immediate reaction to the barracks bombing and their policy recommendations in the months that followed. Unlike in pure Bayesian models, the attack produced a range of interpretations among decision-makers because this new information was filtered through the lens of their prior views. Those who supported the intervention and believed that the United States could still achieve its aims viewed the attack as further evidence of the need to maintain or expand the peacekeeping mission. Conversely, those who opposed the deployment of U.S. forces to Lebanon saw the casualties as confirmation of the intervention's futility and as an additional reason to disengage.

Everyone agreed the bombing was a tragedy, but not everyone took the attack as evidence that the United States had faced a setback calling its mission into question. Indeed, by providing added evidence for their preferred courses of action, and thereby deepening the fractures within the administration, the bombings increased the "stickiness," or durability, of policymakers' theories of success (or impending failure). Thus, the outcome of the Reagan administration's deliberations in the months after the barracks bombing was not pre-ordained by the scale of the losses or expectations of domestic political backlash. It was, however, increasingly influenced by theories U.S. leaders already held about the mission.

A counterfactual analysis of the events leading to the U.S. military withdrawal from Lebanon reveals an alternative explanation for the administration's ultimate decision to disengage from the country. Until the very end, optimists like Reagan and Shultz maintained their conviction that the Marine presence would help bring stability to the troubled region, even as the security situation in Lebanon deteriorated and negotiations faltered. Only in early February 1984, when a series of local crises threatened and ultimately overwhelmed the Lebanese Armed Forces, did the Cabinet finally

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16   Our study's dependent variable is the status of U.S. forces from Lebanon. Our intervening variable is the "theory of success" or "theory of failure" applied to the American military presence in Lebanon. Our independent variable is new information from the field. Information is filtered through the various theories of success and theories of failure held by different camps within the administration, making the intervening variable the one of most interest. Casualty-sensitivity arguments use public opinion as the intervening variable of interest while strategic course correction, as presented here, has new information directly leading to a choice about withdrawal.

17   Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada," broadcast speech, Oct. 27, 1983, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/102783b.

18   We adjusted the more common term "theories of victory" in order to include all aspects of a state's power brought to bear during an intervention. On theories of victory, see: Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command* (New York: Free Press, 2002) 33; J. Boone Bartholomees, "Theory of Victory," *Parameters* (Summer 2008): 25–36, https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/Articles/08summer/bartholo.htm.

19   Eliot A. Cohen, "What's Obama's Counterinsurgency Strategy for Afghanistan?" *Washington Post*, Dec. 6, 2009, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/12/04/AR2009120402602.html.

form the consensus necessary to persuade Reagan to order the redeployment. The collapse of the Lebanese forces provided conclusive evidence that the president's theory of success, which posited that the Lebanese government could, with sufficient U.S. support, reassert control without a wider American ground presence, was no longer viable. What occurred was not a thoughtful withdrawal or a maneuver to placate domestic electoral pressures in the face of disconfirming evidence. Rather, confronted with the decision to either terminate or massively escalate U.S. involvement, Reagan finally conceded defeat.

A Counterfactual History

To assess the effect that the Marine barracks bombing had on U.S. policy in Lebanon, we combine historical analysis of the Reagan administration's internal deliberations with counterfactual examination of three inflection points that occurred between the Oct. 23, 1983, attack and the Feb. 7, 1984, decision to terminate the peacekeeping mission. Once derided by historians and political scientists alike, counterfactual analysis offers a powerful qualitative tool to test theories of causality.[20] Because it challenges researchers to envision alternative unrealized futures, counterfactual analysis also illuminates flaws in established narratives and provides a safeguard against confirmation bias, making it a valuable method to re-evaluate the popular Lebanese example. By comparing possible outcomes against actual events, we seek to "weigh" the bombing's significance as a driver of U.S. decision-making and to judge the effect of public opinion and rational

strategic reassessment on the administration's decision-making.

To control against indefensible extrapolations, we draw upon multiple related analytical frameworks.[21] We blend inductive historical and theory-guided analysis to "describe, explain, interpret, [and] understand a single case as an end in itself."[22] We employ theory as a guide to identify causal pathways and to help select likely or feasible counterfactual scenarios. Deep analysis of the historical record is also necessary to identify potential turning points, assess realistic alternatives, and weigh the probability of potential consequences. As a historically-minded political scientist and a historian versed in political theory, we aim to conduct an interdisciplinary study that draws equally from both traditions.

Toward this end, we conducted archival work to build a rich case study of decision-making with regard to Lebanon between October 1983 and February 1984.[23] Declassified government records, oral histories, memoirs, and contemporary news reporting allowed us to reconstruct the Reagan administration's internal debates and to trace changes in that debate across time.[24] By carefully

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following a causal chain from origin to outcome, we can identify policymakers' assumptions, isolate points of contention, and delineate a range of alternative outcomes that were possible at the

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20   Here, we join a burgeoning effort to reevaluate the methodological utility of rigorous counterfactual analysis. See: Francis J. Gavin, "What If? The Historian and the Counterfactual," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 425–30, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070610; Jack S. Levy, "Counterfactuals, Causal Inference, and Historical Analysis," *Security Studies* 24, no. 3 (2015): 378–402, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2015.1070602; Richard Ned Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit: Counterfactuals and International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 395–415; James D. Fearon, "Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science," *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1991): 169–95, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2010470.

21   We draw primarily on those proposed by Jack Levy, who compiled and adapted several earlier studies of counterfactuals. See Levy, "Counterfactuals."

22   Jack S. Levy, "Case Studies: Types, Designs, and Logics of Inference," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 25, no. 1 (2008): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/07388940701860318. For an application of this method to counterfactuals, see: Levy, "Counterfactuals," 383.

23   Archival records were collected between June 2014 and May 2018 from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, Princeton University Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, National Records and Archives in College Park, MD, and George Washington University's National Security Archive. The U.S. State Department's Virtual Reading Room, the CIA Records Search Tool (CREST) database, and the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training's oral history collections were also invaluable.

24   Levy, "Counterfactuals," 385–86.

time.[25] Tracing the decision-making process this way serves as a check against common cognitive distortions like hindsight bias, or the tendency to see past occurrences as obvious and the future as predictable. It also forms a foundation from which to build realistic alternatives.[26]

In identifying turning points during this period for counterfactual comparison, we prioritized instances in which: (1) the Reagan administration engaged in a high-level debate over whether to expand, contract, or terminate the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon; (2) the ultimate outcome was contingent on specific, isolatable variables (e.g., the presence of an individual or the occurrence of an event); and (3) an alternative could be extrapolated with minimal speculation. To avoid what historian Francis Gavin has termed the "fallacy of focusing on the last out," we also selected examples from across the four-month period in question.[27] Broadening our temporal lens allows us to account for fluctuations over time, to consider cumulative effects, and to build a rich causal narrative that accounts for individual learning, the dynamics of decision-making, and the "stickiness" of theories of success or failure over time.

Three moments satisfied our criteria. First, the October 23 bombing, which required many things to go right for the attackers, including acquiring the explosives and securing a determined suicide bomber, and many to go wrong for the United States and its allies, namely, an overabundance of intelligence and the inability to interdict the truck.[28] Second, the botched December 3 raid against Syrian targets that led to the death of one American pilot and the capture of a second. And third, the mass defection of the Lebanese Armed Forces in February 1984, an outcome contingent on the success of a risky anti-government offensive. In evaluating each example, we define a clear counterfactual antecedent (e.g., the Lebanese forces *did not* collapse), a set of hypothesized consequences (e.g., the U.S. *decision* to stay), and a causal path (e.g., *because* the Lebanese government remained stable, American officials could still argue for supporting it).[29]

Withdrawing from Lebanon, a Brief History

Lebanon forced its way onto the Reagan administration's agenda in April 1981, when a confrontation between Israeli-backed Christian militants and Syrian deterrent forces stationed in the Bekaa Valley nearly provoked a fifth Arab-Israeli war. To avert a regional conflict, the president dispatched career diplomat Philip Habib to broker a new framework delineating Syrian, Palestinian, and Israeli zones of operations in Lebanon. Habib's tireless mediation succeeded in defusing a series of confrontations over the next 16 months. Nevertheless, Israeli preparations for a major ground offensive continued despite U.S. protests.[30]

On June 6, 1982, the long-planned Israeli invasion began. Within one week, the Israel Defense Forces had laid siege to Beirut in an effort to evict and destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization and thereby secure Israel's northern border region. After inconclusive negotiations, the Reagan administration announced in July of that year that the president had agreed, in principle, to deploy U.S. marines to Lebanon. In August, the first contingent disembarked in Beirut as part of the Multinational Force tasked with overseeing the evacuation of Palestinian and Syrian fighters from the city.[31]

Despite the ferocity of the fighting in Lebanon, the congressional reaction to Reagan's commitment of U.S. forces was mixed. Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker expressed private reservations, and the House Foreign Affairs Committee convened an emergency session to review the administration's proposal.[32] The White House averted more sustained opposition, however, by insisting on its

25   In so doing, we borrowed from the political scientific method of process tracing and the historical subdisciplines of diplomatic and military history. Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 6.

26   Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit*, 38.

27   Gavin, "What If?" 428.

28   For a comprehensive assessment from an American perspective, see: "Report of the DOD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983," Dec. 20, 1983, https://fas.org/irp/threat/beirut-1983.pdf.

29   Levy, "Counterfactuals," 388–89; Lebow, *Forbidden Fruit*, 54.

30   John Boykin, *Cursed Is the Peacemaker: The American Diplomat Versus the Israeli General, Beirut 1982* (Belmont, CA: Applegate Press, 2002); Fadi Esber, "The United States and the 1981 Lebanese Missile Crisis," *Middle East Journal* 70, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 441–43, https://doi.org/10.3751/70.3.15.

31   In addition to the U.S. contingent, France and Italy contributed forces to the first Multinational Force. For discussion of Israeli and Palestinian military operations, see: Rashid Khalidi, *Under Siege: PLO Decisionmaking During the 1982 War*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Ze'ev Schiff & Ehud Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984). For U.S. negotiations, see: Boykin, *Cursed Is the Peacemaker*.

32   Kriner, *After the Rubicon*, 198.

intent to comply with the provisions of the War Powers Act. Under the terms of the Lebanese government's invitation, U.S. forces were authorized to participate on a "limited and temporary basis" not to exceed 30 days, and they were equipped with unloaded weapons consistent with a non-combat mission. "I want to emphasize that there is no intention or expectation that U.S. Armed Forces will become involved in hostilities," Reagan wrote to Congress, underscoring that Habib had secured guarantees from all armed parties in the city.[33]

The first marines arrived ashore on Aug. 24, 1982. The Palestine Liberation Organization evacuation was completed quickly and without incident, and on September 8 — nearly two weeks before the mission's scheduled end — the Pentagon announced the Marines' early departure. They sailed from Lebanon two days later under banners reading "Mission Accomplished Farewell."[34]

Their withdrawal proved premature. Within days, President-Elect Bashir Gemayel, leader of Lebanon's far-right Christian Phalange militia, was assassinated and the Israel Defense Forces re-entered Beirut, where they allowed Maronite fighters to massacre hundreds of Palestinian refugees.[35] Horrified by the carnage, and eager to dispel accusations of U.S. complicity, Reagan ordered the Marines to return to Beirut as part of a reconstituted multinational force tasked with three expanded political objectives: (1) to facilitate the withdrawal of Syrian and Israeli forces from Lebanon; (2) to strengthen the Lebanese national army; and (3) to assist the central government's efforts to restore stability.[36]

Over the next year, Reagan authorized gradual expansions in the Marine mission even as negotiations for the withdrawal of foreign forces stalled and efforts to strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces faltered.[37] Determined to dispel the memory of Vietnam, and confident in what he saw as America's unique obligation to promote peace abroad, Reagan envisioned the troops playing an indispensable role in promoting a lasting peace in Lebanon. His convictions were encouraged by optimistic assessments from Shultz, his secretary of state, and National Security Adviser William Clark. Reagan approved Lebanese government requests to expand the Marines' patrol zone and launch an ambitious military modernization program over the fall of 1982.[38] By January 1983, the marines could be seen serving alongside Lebanese soldiers at observation posts and checkpoints throughout the capital.[39]

These new responsibilities chipped away at U.S. claims of neutrality in the country's civil war, eroding Lebanese popular support for the peacekeeping presence and bringing American diplomats and marines into the crosshairs. Attacks on the Multinational Force ticked upward in February and March, compelling the Marines to

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33 Letters to House Speaker Thomas O'Neill and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Strom Thurmond from President Reagan, Aug. 24, 1982, Box 91451, I290676, National Security Council System Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum (hereafter Reagan Library). The Marines' commander, Col. James Mead, reiterated the point in comments to reporters, emphasizing that he did "not anticipat[e] any need for us to use our weapons. We came here as peace-keepers." See: Loren Jenkins, "800 Marines Take Positions In Beirut Port," *Washington Post*, Aug. 26, 1982, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1982/08/26/800-marines-take-positions-in-beirut-port/fb0bd991-2f57-4fbe-947a-6f5de9e80c04/.

34 Boykin, *Cursed Is the Peacemaker,* in particular 60–265.

35 Schiff and Ya'ari, *Israel's Lebanon War*, 254–56. On the Israel Defense Forces' reentry, see: Cable from Embassy Beirut to Department of State, "Draper Mission: IDF Military Actions in Beirut Sept. 15," Sept. 15, 1982; Cable from Embassy Tel Aviv to Department of State, "The IDF in Beirut: Foreign Ministry Views," Sept. 15, 1982; Cable from Washington to Embassy Tel Aviv, "Secretary's Meeting with Israeli Ambassador on IDF Move into West Beirut," Sept. 16, 1982, all accessed in State Department Virtual Reading Room. Evidence of the massacres reached Washington at 5:45 a.m. on Sunday, Sept. 18, after embassy officials gained entrance to the camps and transmitted a live report of the devastation over transmitter radio.

36 France and Italy agreed to contribute forces to the second Multinational Force. In addition, the British contributed a symbolic force. While representatives of the four peacekeeping missions met regularly to coordinate their efforts, share intelligence, and mediate disputes, each operated autonomously and under national command. Cable from Department of State to Embassy Beirut, "Draper Mission: Exchange of Notes on Participation of US Forces in Second Beirut MNF," Sept. 23, 1982, Box 90317, Arab-Israel Peace Process/Cables Sept 1982 (2/4), Geoffrey Kemp Files, Reagan Library; Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell & Davies, 1994), 211; Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 138–52.

37 In a demonstration of its confidence in the administration's policy, the State Department initially predicted that a complete withdrawal of all foreign forces could be achieved within two months. Memorandum for William Clark from L. Paul Bremer, "Diplomatic Strategy—Approximate Timetable," Nov. 4, 1982, Box 91286, National Security Decision Directive 64 (1), National Security Council Executive Secretariat records (hereafter NSC Executive Secretariat records), Reagan Library. See also: Memorandum for Shultz from Clark, "Next Steps in Lebanon," Nov. 8, 1982, Box 4, Chron September 1982 [09/16/1982–09/22/1982], Robert C. McFarlane Files, Reagan Library.

38 Memorandum for Reagan from Clark, "President Gemayel's Request for the Deployment of MNF Mobile Patrols into East Beirut," Oct. 30, 1982, Box 90496, Middle East—MNF [Multinational Force], Kemp Files, Reagan Library; "Announcement on Participation of U.S. Marines in MNF Patrols in East Beirut," c. Oct. 30, 1982, Box 4, Chron-November 1982 (McFarlane)(1), McFarlane Files, Reagan Library. For an insightful evaluation of the military modernization effort, see: Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 108–205.

39 Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon*, 36–70; For an assessment of the Lebanese army, see: Joseph A. Kechichian, "The Lebanese Army: Capabilities and Challenges in the 1980s," *Conflict Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 15–39.

tighten coordination with Lebanese government forces.[40] On April 17, 1983, Shia militants supported by both Iran and Syria detonated a car bomb outside the U.S. embassy in Beirut, killing 58.[41] The attack precipitated a final push to secure an Israeli-Lebanese withdrawal arrangement, but the resulting written agreement was stymied by Syrian opposition.[42] Denouncing the continued U.S. presence, Syria increased its support for Druze and Shia factions in the mountainous Shouf District overlooking Beirut, intensifying a simmering standoff over Phalange encroachment.[43] As the fighting spread over the summer, attacks on Americans spiked. From August 4 to September 7, clashes killed four marines and wounded another 28, more than a threefold increase in total casualties over the previous 10-month period.[44] A series of pitched confrontations in September between the Lebanese Armed Forces and militias in the mountains prompted expansions to the rules of engagement for U.S. forces, which now directly supported the government of Lebanon with artillery and naval fire.[45]

By the fall of 1983, progress toward all three U.S. objectives in Lebanon had stalled. Congress authorized an 18-month extension to the Marines' mandate in September, but public attitudes toward the already-unpopular intervention declined as the security situation worsened — by mid-September only 17 percent of adult Americans favored continued U.S. participation.[46] Intelligence analysts cautioned that the opportunity for a negotiated withdrawal of foreign forces had passed and that Lebanon's de facto partition was all but inevitable. "All the indicators are now moving the wrong way on our policy commitment," CIA analyst Graham

Determined to dispel the memory of Vietnam, and confident in what he saw as America's unique obligation to promote peace abroad, Reagan envisioned the troops playing an indispensable role in promoting a lasting peace in Lebanon.

Fuller warned the agency's deputy director, John McMahon. "We must be ready to face the fact that we have reached the end of the road."[47]

Policymakers recognized that they had arrived at a decision point, but they disagreed bitterly over how, or whether, a continued U.S. military presence could accelerate a negotiated settlement in Lebanon. In one camp, Defense Secretary Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Vessey, who had opposed the decision to deploy the Marines a year earlier, pushed Reagan to draw down the U.S. presence, arguing that the administration's initial theory of success was, by now, strategically bankrupt. The intensifying conflict, they argued, demonstrated the mission's futility and increased the odds of a miscalculation or confrontation that might alienate Arab opinion and strain the U.S. military's limited resources in

40   Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon*, 55–59.

41   Situation Report, "Embassy Explosion," April 18, 1983, Beirut Explosion [Sic] April 18–May 12 1983(1), NSC Executive Secretariat Cable Records, 1982–1985, Reagan Library. The attack decimated the embassy's CIA station, crippling American intelligence efforts in Lebanon. For a thoughtful assessment of its impact, see: Kai Bird, *The Good Spy: The Life and Death of Robert Ames* (New York: Crown, 2014), 304–18.

42   Cable from Draper, "Habib/Draper Mission: Test [sic] of Israel-Lebanon Agreement," May 13, 1983, State Department Virtual Reading Room.

43   Cable from Embassy Tel Aviv, "Meeting with Defense Minister Arens—Deepening Israeli Concern about Syrian and PLO moves in Lebanon," May 12, 1983, State Department Virtual Reading Room; Memorandum for William Casey and John McMahon from Graham Fuller (NIO/NESA), "US Vulnerability in Lebanon," May 6, 1983, CREST. On Syria's motivation, see: Patrick Seale, *Asad of Syria: The Struggle for the Middle East* (London: I.B. Taurus, 1988), 394–96.

44   David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict With Iran* (New York: Penguin, 2012), 129–35.

45   National Security Decision Directive 103, "Strategy for Lebanon," Sept. 10, 1983, and "Addendum to NSDD 103 On Lebanon of September 10, 1983," Sept. 11, 1983, CREST; Paper, "Near-Term Lebanon Strategy," Sept. 6, 1983, CREST; Memorandum for Reagan from Clark, Sept. 3, 1983, Box 91306, NSPG0068 and 0068A 03 Sept 1983 (1), NSC Executive Secretariat Records.

46   Memorandum from Richard Wirthlin, "The Situation in Lebanon," Sept. 21, 1983, Box 688, Folder 13, Meese Collection, Hoover Institution. On congressional and popular attitudes toward the intervention from September 1982 through October 1983, see: Kriner, *After the Rubicon*, 200–9.

47   Memorandum for the Acting Director of Central Intelligence from Graham E. Fuller (NIO/NESA), "Downward Spiral in Lebanon," Aug. 16, 1983, CREST. For later warnings, see: "Talking Points on Lebanon for the DCI," Oct. 3, 1983; Special National Intelligence Estimate, "Prospects for Lebanon" (SNIE 36.4-83), Oct. 11, 1983, CREST, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85M00363R000701600031-8.pdf.

the region.[48] "Our whole policy, including the MNF presence and the buildup of the [Lebanese Armed Forces], was premised on achieving a *diplomatic* success. ... Absent this, there was no *military* action that could succeed, unless we declared war and tried to force the occupying troops out of Lebanon," Weinberger later wrote. "Our position was becoming increasingly dangerous, and was in fact useless."[49]

Yet Secretary of State Shultz, National Security Adviser Clark, and Bud McFarlane, who replaced Clark in early October 1983, contended that the administration's objectives remained within reach. This camp expressed confidence in America's capacity to promote peace in Lebanon, and espoused a theory of success in which the peacekeepers' presence would bolster confidence in the Lebanese government, encourage Israeli and Syrian concessions, and accelerate the process of national reconciliation. Appealing to Reagan's fear that his predecessors, cowed by the U.S. failure in Vietnam, had neglected American alliances and undermined the country's reputation, they upheld Lebanon as a litmus test for American power in the world. The conflict, this camp argued in memoranda and private conversations, was both a "historic opportunity" to secure America's position in a strategic region and a gamble that placed U.S. "credibility as a great power [at] stake."[50] The world was watching to see what the United States would do when tested, and Shultz, Clark, and McFarlane urged the president to deploy additional marines as part of an expanded mission to support the Lebanese Armed Forces in reasserting government control beyond the capital.[51]

The impasse deepened the administration's internal fractures, and the debate stretched on without resolution into October. As governor of California and later as president, Reagan frequently demonstrated a willingness to cut his political losses and reverse course on a range of domestic matters, a strategy that his advisers described as "damage limitation" and that commentators viewed as a signature "tactical realism."[52] He worried about escalating the crisis, and he listened to Weinberger's warnings. Yet Shultz, Clark, and McFarlane's arguments appealed to the president's deeply held conviction that diplomacy worked best when backed by demonstrations of strength. Reagan still believed that the United States could secure a negotiated withdrawal of Syrian and Israeli forces from Lebanon, and he continued to view the Marine presence as an important symbol of American staying power.

But Reagan was characteristically disinclined to mediate between his advisers, and he deferred the question of whether to augment the peacekeeping mission during repeated National Security Planning Group meetings in early October.[53] As a result, the national security leaders were already deeply divided over Lebanon when news of the barracks bombing reached Washington.

The Marine Barracks Bombing — Oct. 23, 1983

Early on the morning of Oct. 23, 1983, Marine sentries stationed at Beirut International Airport observed a yellow Mercedes truck circling a public parking lot south of their compound. The Marines had suffered an unusual spate of casualties over the previous two weeks, and the sentries had been instructed to watch for suspicious vehicles. But there had been so many warnings — and the details were so sparse — that the guards dismissed the circling truck until, at 6:22 a.m., the driver picked up speed and turned toward the compound. As the marines scrambled to load their weapons, the driver maneuvered past the guard post and crashed

48   Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace,* 160 n7; Diary of Deputy Secretary of State Kenneth Dam, Oct. 23, 1982, State Department Virtual Reading Room; Gail E.S. Yoshitani, "National Power and Military Force: The Origins of the Weinberger Doctrine, 1980–1984" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2018), 203. Weinberger proposed that the marines be kept on Navy ships 400 to 500 yards offshore. They would be safer but still available to support President Gemayel if necessary. See: Ralph A. Hallenbeck, *Military Force as an Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy: Intervention in Lebanon, August 1982–February 1984* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 91–92.

49   Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 155–57; Caspar Weinberger, interview, *Frontline*, PBS, undated.

50   A desire to demonstrate resolve and build Arab partners' confidence in the United States motivated the decision to intervene in Lebanon. The Reagan administration anticipated that progress in Lebanon would revitalize the peace process and encourage strategic cooperation against the Soviet Union and other radical forces in the region. Memorandum for Secretary of State George Shultz from National Security Adviser William Clark, "Next Steps in Lebanon," Nov. 8, 1982, Box 4, Chron September 1982 [09/16/1982–09/22/1982], McFarlane Files, Reagan Library; Memorandum for Reagan from Clark, "National Security Planning Group Meeting," April 22, 1983, CREST.

51   Memorandum, "Lebanon: Litmus Test for U.S. Credibility and Commitment," Oct. 18, 1983, Box 91290, National Security Decision Directive 103 (1), NSC Executive Secretariat National Security Decision Directive Records, Reagan Library; Memorandum for Reagan from Shultz, "Our Strategy in Lebanon and the Middle East," attached to Memorandum for Reagan from Clark, Oct. 13, 1983, Box 91306, NSPG0072 14 Oct 1983, NSC Executive Secretariat Records.

52   Hedrick Smith, "Reagan's Crucial Year," *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 16, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/10/16/magazine/reagan-s-crucial-year.html.

53   Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 275–76; Ronald Reagan, news conference, Oct. 19, 1983, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/101983e.

into the barracks building, where he detonated the truck's explosive load. The blast leveled the structure, killing 241 Americans.[54]

The attack shocked the Reagan administration. McFarlane, a week into his new role as national security adviser, recalled that the president was stricken by early reports of American casualties. But Reagan's grief was soon replaced by anger. "Those sons of bitches," he swore as the first reports of casualties trickled back to Washington. "Let's find a way to go after them."[55] Within days, the intelligence community had gathered conclusive evidence of Syrian and Iranian culpability, including intercepted communications and an eye witness who shadowed the explosive-laden truck after it left the Iranian embassy in Beirut.[56] "If there ever was a 24-karat gold document, this was it," a participant close to the process recalled. "This was not something from the third cousin of the fourth wife of Muhammed the taxicab driver."[57]

But while McFarlane, Shultz, and the National Security Council staff pressed for rapid reprisals to deter further attacks,[58] Weinberger and Vessey urged the president to defer a decision until after a scheduled trip to East Asia in early November.[59] If advocates of the Multinational Force viewed the bombing as evidence of the need for a peacekeeping force in Lebanon, the Department of Defense interpreted the attack as further confirmation that the Marines' objectives were unattainable and

feared that a confrontation might drag the Marines deeper into a quagmire. Dismissing the intelligence linking Syria and Iran to the attack, Weinberger and Vessey insisted that there was still insufficient evidence to justify military action.[60] Emboldened, the defense secretary renewed his campaign to persuade the president to bring the Marines home.[61]

In retrospect, these officials' reactions to the Beirut bombing were emblematic of a pattern of behavior that persisted over the course of the Marine mission in Lebanon. Rather than re-evaluate their positions, policymakers instead sought to fit the new information into their pre-established theories of the intervention's viability. New information often served to reinforce their arguments, worsening divisions within the administration and decreasing the possibility of compromise or consensus. When reports from the field did not conform with their prior expectations, Weinberger and others disputed the news and doubled down on their already established positions.

The defense secretary eventually succeeded in persuading Reagan to defer a decision on retaliation until he returned to Washington in mid-November. Yet, the president's confidence in the Marines' mission in Lebanon deepened in the days after the bombing. In conversations with his advisers and public statements, Reagan underscored the importance of maintaining the

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54   A near-simultaneous attack on the French military headquarters in Beirut would bring the day's death toll to 299. For a description of the attack, see: Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon*, 1–3, 93–96; Geraghty, *Peacekeepers at War*, 91–95. For initial reaction, see: CIA report, "Terrorism Review," Oct. 27, 1983, CREST; Cable, "Major Bomb Attack on U.S. and French Contingent—Situation as of 0830 Local," Box 91353, Lebanon Bombing/Airport Oct. 23, 1983, NSC Executive Secretariat Country Files, Reagan Library; Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) Spot Report, Oct. 23, 1983, Box 110, Lebanon Situation (10/23/1983), NSC Executive Secretariat Cable Files; Cable, "Lebanon Situation/DIA INTSUM NBR 8 (As of 231600Z Oct 83)," Oct. 24, 1983, CREST.

55   Quoted in: Timberg, *The Nightingale's Song*, 337. See also: McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 263. For a similar, albeit less colorful, vow, see: Memorandum of Telephone Conversation between Reagan and French President François Mitterrand, Oct. 24, 1983, Box 52, Memorandums of Conversation — President Reagan (October 1983), NSC Executive Secretariat Subject File, Reagan Library.

56   DIA Spot Report, Oct. 23, 1983; Note for McFarlane from Howard Teicher attributing blame for Beirut International Airport attack, Oct. 27, 1983, and Telegram from Edward W. Hickey Jr. to McFarlane, Oct. 27, 1983, Box 91353, Lebanon Bombing/Airport Oct. 23, 1983, NSC Executive Secretariat Country Files; Memorandum for Reagan from Gen. P.X. Kelley, "Visit to Beirut, 25-26 October 1983," Nov. 2, 1983, Box 2, Security for the U.S. Multinational Forces (MNF) Contingency in Beirut, John Poindexter Files, Reagan Library. For a thorough accounting of the unclassified and declassified evidence linking Iran and Syria to the attack, see: David C. Wills, *The First War on Terrorism: Counter-Terrorism Policy During the Reagan Administration* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 69–71; Crist, *Twilight War*, 134–42.

57   Quoted in: Crist, *Twilight War*, 142.

58   Memorandum for McFarlane from Teicher, "Draft NSDD on Lebanon and Middle East," Oct. 26, 1983, Box 91354, Lebanon Chronology (1), NSC Executive Secretariat Country Files; Action Memorandum, "Deterrent Action Against Perpetrators of 23 Oct Bombing US Marines in Beirut," Nov. 4, 1983, Box 23315, 8391354, NSC Executive Secretariat System File, Reagan Library; Wills, *First War on Terrorism*, 65; Crist, *Twilight War*, 144–47.

59   Wills, *First War on Terrorism*, 65–73. Reagan's determination to strike lasted through Nov. 7, when he wrote in his diary that "we have a fix on a headquarters of the radical Iranian Shiites who blew up our Marines. We can take out the target with an air strike & no risk to civilians." A 7 a.m. National Security Council meeting the next day, however, led him to change his mind, and he reported to his diary that he'd decided "we don't have enough intelligence info yet." Reagan, *Diaries*, 284–85.

60   Milton Coleman, "Identity of Attackers Eludes U.S. Probers," *Washington Post*, Nov. 7, 1983, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/11/07/identity-of-attackers-eludes-us-probers/26304c1f-7705-49c3-9ba3-f91f34c3f189/.

61   Weinberger and Vessey also sought to undermine popular support for retaliation by sowing uncertainty about the quality of U.S. intelligence. During a *Meet the Press* interview on Nov. 6 — days after he reviewed the signals intelligence linking the Iranian embassy to the bombers — Gen. Vessey insisted that U.S. analysts "really don't know who did it." Crist, *Twilight War*, 140.

course, cautioning his advisers that adversaries were watching the administration's next steps.[62] Within days, he approved a series of presidential directives reasserting the importance of a U.S. military presence in Lebanon and modifying the Marines' rules of engagement to allow U.S. forces to support Lebanese Armed Forces operations outside Beirut, including positions "in danger of being overrun by hostile forces."[63] Notably, these directives were based on drafts circulated in advance of the October 23 bombing and were signed after only minor corrections.[64] In addition, he dispatched Marine Commandant P.X. Kelley to assess efforts to fortify American positions and evaluate whether additional security measures were needed.[65] With these actions, Reagan demonstrated his intention to maintain the U.S. presence in Lebanon, regardless of the risks. "What the President did not want to do, above all, was … to be seen as running away," recalled McFarlane. "To the contrary, the barracks bombing seemed to strengthen his resolve to stay."[66]

Reagan was not alone in this view. Neither Shultz nor McFarlane wavered in his support for the intervention, and both pushed the president to demonstrate his continued commitment to the cause.[67] Even the president's political advisers,

typically sensitive to partisan winds, urged continuity. "Stability in the Middle East — and progress toward peace there — is vital to world peace," Edwin Meese III, one of the president's

> **Rather than re-evaluate their positions, policymakers instead sought to fit the new information into their pre-established theories of the intervention's viability.**

closest confidants, wrote to Reagan the day after the bombing, reiterating the president's concern that the U.S. commitment to Lebanon had become a litmus test of America's reliability as an ally. "If we are driven out of Lebanon, the radicals, the rejectionists, the violent will have won," he warned, suggesting that a failure of resolve would be interpreted as a green light to challenge U.S. interests elsewhere.[68] Shultz echoed Meese's warning in nearly identical terms during briefings on Capitol Hill, adding that "the presence of our Marines has been a crucial pillar of the structure of stability that is needed to make a political solution possible."[69] Implicit in both arguments was an understanding that the attack threatened to derail the administration's broader effort to establish a

62   Talking Points on Lebanon, c. Oct. 24, 1983, Box 91353, Lebanon Bombing/Airport Oct. 23 1983, NSC Executive Secretariat Country Files; "Presidential Remarks: Regional Broadcasters Luncheon, Monday, October 24, 1983," Box 1, Airstrike 12/04/1983, Philip Dur Files, Reagan Library. The president's confidence stretched through his departure for Asia in early November. See: Message from Reagan for Margaret Thatcher, Nov. 6, 1983, 8391397, Office of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Files, Reagan Library.

63   National Security Decision Directive 109, "Responding to the Lebanon Crisis," Oct. 23, 1983; National Security Decision Directive 111, "Next Steps Toward Progress in Lebanon and the Middle East," Oct. 28, 1983, both in Box 91354, Lebanon Chronology (1), NSC Executive Secretariat Country Files, Reagan Library.

64   Memorandum for Shultz, Weinberger, Casey, Vessey from McFarlane, "National Security Decision Directive on Lebanon and the Middle East," Oct. 29, 1983, Box 91354, Lebanon Chronology (1), NSC Executive Secretariat Country Files, Reagan Library.

65   See also: National Security Decision Directive 111; Memorandum for McFarlane from Teicher, "Draft NSDD on Lebanon and Middle East," Oct. 26, 1983; Memorandum for McFarlane, "Additional Security Measures at Beirut International Airport," c. Oct. 23, 1983, all in Box 91353, Lebanon Bombing/Airport Oct. 23 1983, NSC Executive Secretariat Country Files.

66   McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 268.

67   McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 268–69; Memorandum for Reagan from McFarlane, "NSDD: Lebanon and the Middle East," Oct. 28, 1983, Box 91354, Lebanon Chronology (1); Memorandum for Reagan from Shultz, "Sentiment in Congress with Respect to the Bombing in Beirut and our Policy in Lebanon," Oct. 26, 1983, 91666, Howard Teicher Chron. October 1983, Howard Teicher Files, Reagan Library. For a summary of the State Department's position, see: "Testimony of Rear Admiral Jonathan T. Howe" (director of the State Department Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs), Nov. 2, 1983, Box 8, National Security Decision Directives (NSDD) 109/111–Lebanon and the Middle East, Dur Files, Reagan Library.

68   Memorandum for Reagan and Adm. John Poindexter from Edwin Meese III, "The Stakes in Lebanon," Box 91353, Lebanon Bombing/Airport Oct. 23, 1983.

69   Excerpted in "'We Will Stay, And We Will Carry Out Our Mission,'" *Washington Post*, Oct. 25, 1983, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1983/10/25/the-beirut-massacre/7831420f-de61-4681-b6a9-c9c6a40b8235/.

reputation for resolve, one manifested in the figure of the marines themselves.[70]

The documentary evidence reveals that concern for public attitudes played almost no role in decision-makers' arguments for retaliation or the president's decision to defer military action. Official deliberations, whether during National Security Council meetings or in written memoranda, concentrated on the continued prospect of success and the effects that both retaliation and withdrawal could have on U.S. credibility abroad. In fact, Reagan dismissed media speculation that the bombing would harm his political future as the work of "whining" journalists, suggesting it was a ploy to retaliate for the Defense Department's decision to limit access to Grenada, where U.S. troops had landed on October 25. "The press is trying to give this the Vietnam treatment but don't think the people will buy it," he wrote in his diary.[71]

To the contrary, Reagan believed that the American public would support the Marines' mission if they understood its global importance and were presented with evidence that progress was being made. "We must show that the cause was worth dying for," he insisted to his advisers.[72] A presidential directive elaborated on this logic, forecasting that the appearance of passivity — particularly during an election season — would undermine American security interests and encourage foreign adversaries by signaling that the administration was vulnerable at home.[73] To avert this outcome, Reagan hand-drafted an address, televised on Oct. 27, 1983, making the case for continuing the peacekeeping mission.[74] Staring straight into the camera, he rebuffed accusations that his administration lacked a coherent strategy and emphasized his confidence in the prospects for success, insisting that the goal of a stable and secure Lebanon remained within reach so long as the "physical presence of the marines lends support to both the Lebanese government and its army." The efforts of the Multinational Force had already moved Lebanon a step closer to stability and order, he argued, claiming that "with our assistance and training" the Lebanese government had "set up its own army ... able to hold the lines and maintain the defensive perimeter around Beirut."[75]

Yet, Reagan did more than seek to justify his administration's past actions. He also used the speech to outline a powerful argument for expanding the U.S. role in Lebanon, a process laid out in a classified directive he signed the next day.[76] Emphasizing the Middle East's strategic importance, he described Lebanon as the fulcrum of his administration's efforts to roll back Soviet influence, preserve and expand the Middle East peace process, and restore American credibility abroad. The crisis in Lebanon, he argued, reflected a broader, global struggle to rebuild American power and persuade the country's enemies that the United States remained willing to use force despite its humiliation in Vietnam. "If terrorism and intimidation succeed ... [i]t won't just be Lebanon sentenced to a future of chaos," he warned. The strength of the United States rested, he argued, in its willingness and ability to assume the risks inherent to promoting stability. "We're not somewhere else in the world protecting someone else's interests; we're there protecting our own," he cautioned.[77]

Reagan's gamble paid off. The president's address produced, in his words, a "complete turnaround" in popular attitudes, and Republican National Committee polling showed general support for the administration's efforts in Lebanon lasting through early November.[78] The administration's favored pollster, Richard Wirthlin, emphasized the upward trend, noting that surveys indicated two-thirds of the electorate agreed that "Americans should not be driven out of Lebanon." These

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70   We use the term "credibility" as Reagan and many of his advisers did at the time: to suggest that one's past actions might influence an adversary's expectation for future actions. This definition differs from most scholars' use of the term and instead equates to the notion of "reputation for resolve." See: Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights for Reputation: The Psychology of Leaders in International Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 5–11; Shiping Tang, "Reputation, Cult of Reputation, and International Conflict," *Security Studies* 14, no. 1 (2005): 38, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410591001474.

71   Reagan, *Diaries*, 281.

72   Quoted in Crist, *Twilight War*, 141.

73   National Security Decision Directive 111, Oct. 28, 1983.

74   Reagan, *Diaries*, 280–81.

75   Reagan, *Diaries*, 280–81.

76   National Security Decision Directive 111, Oct. 28, 1983.

77   Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Events in Lebanon and Grenada," Oct. 27, 1983. For his intentions, see: Reagan, *Diaries*, 280–81.

78   Reagan, *Diaries*, 280–81. Some have suggested that the rally in public support for the president's policy was a side effect of the U.S. invasion of Grenada and not the president's rhetoric. See: Kriner, *After the Rubicon*, 212. The timing of the two events makes it difficult to assign responsibility. Ultimately, the president believed his rhetoric had bolstered public attitudes, and he interpreted the polling bump as evidence that he could weather future criticism.

surveys also showed that the U.S. public was in "strong agreement" with the president's assertion "that the U.S. peacekeeping force in Lebanon was attacked precisely because it was doing its job" and generally supported a long-term U.S. role in Lebanon. Although "the vast majority of the electorate express concern that the situation in Lebanon might plunge the U.S. into another Vietnam, there is also a strong feeling that the outcome there is important to the defense interests of the United States," Wirthlin's report concluded, affirming Reagan's impulse. "The idea of yielding to terrorist action is offensive to the American public, even to save American lives," it added.[79]

Notably, White House confidence in the administration's ability to either shape or withstand changes in public attitudes held even as media speculation intensified in November over the Lebanon imbroglio's potential effect on the president's re-election chances. White House staffers chafed, for instance, at a November 30 *Washington Post* article conjecturing that mounting political pressure would force an early withdrawal, dismissing the suggestion in a Senior Staff Action Items List as not only "inaccurate" but also "harmful to our policy objectives."[80] That neither Weinberger nor other Defense Department officials emphasized the danger of declining popular support in their arguments against the intervention provides additional evidence that this factor held little sway over the White House deliberations. The most serious outstanding question was whether and how the United States would strike back.

A Botched Raid — Dec. 3, 1983

Little serious discussion of withdrawing from Beirut occurred in the days and weeks after the barracks attack. Instead, attention remained focused on whether to retaliate against the perpetrators of the bombing who had been linked to Iranian bases in the Bekaa Valley. Deliberations resumed on November 14, when Reagan returned to Washington from a lengthy trip to East Asia. Over the next two days, he and his advisers debated the wisdom of launching a joint operation with the French against two Iranian installations linked to the attack. The administration was divided along familiar lines: Shultz and McFarlane, now backed by Director of Central Intelligence William Casey, urged the president to order a strike, arguing that retaliation was the only way to protect the negotiating process and deter future attacks. However, Weinberger, worried that further escalation might trap the Marines in Lebanon, dug in his heels. Stressing the danger of collateral damage that could erode local support for the peacekeeping mission and imperil U.S. diplomats and servicemembers in the country, he persuaded Reagan to defer his decision for two more days.[81]

On November 16, Reagan and his advisers gathered to make a decision. What exactly happened in this meeting remains mired in controversy. Some participants later claimed that Reagan approved a joint strike with the French, only to have his order ignored by his defiant defense secretary. For his part, Weinberger maintained that Reagan either never issued an order or retracted it in a private call later that evening.[82] Whatever the reason for U.S. inaction, the French decision to act alone on the morning of November 16 resolved the administration's internal debate. With its intended targets destroyed, and without alternative locations to strike, the Defense Department canceled its reprisal plans in favor of defensive initiatives to mitigate future attacks and prepare the Lebanese Armed Forces for an eventual transfer of responsibility.[83]

Scholars have seized on the U.S. failure to retaliate as evidence that the Reagan administration

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79   Memorandum from Richard B. Wirthlin to Meese, James Baker, and Michael Deaver, "Lebanon," Nov. 9, 1983, Box 688, 1, Meese Collection, Hoover Institution.

80   "Senior Staff Meeting Action Items, 11/30/83," Box 73, 1, James A. Baker III Papers (MC #197), Box 73, Princeton University.

81   For a summary of the National Security Council position, see: Memoranda, "Points To Be Making Before Congress," c. Nov. 10, 1983, and "Improving Security Training Readiness and Visibility of the MNF," c. November 1983, both in Box 7, Lebanon (6), Fortier Files, Reagan Library. The National Security Council and State Department went so far as to draft a presidential statement, letters to regional leaders and NATO allies, and an information cable for all diplomatic posts detailing a naval airstrike on the Bekaa Valley training site. See: Box 91306, National Security Planning Group 0076 23 11/07/1983 [Iran-Iraq; October 1983 Lebanon Marine Bombing] (1 of 2), NSC Executive Secretariat Records. For the Pentagon's opposition and a summary of the debate, see: McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 268–69; Crist, *Twilight War*, 144–45; Wills, *First War on Terrorism*, 73. For Reagan's resolve, see: Reagan, *Diaries*, 288.

82   For a balanced review of the available evidence supporting both claims, see: Crist, *Twilight War*, 147; Wills, *First War on Terrorism*, 73–75. In his diary entry that day, Reagan noted that U.S. officials "contacted [the] French about a joint operation in Beirut re the car bombings" but does not specify his decision. Reagan, *Diaries*, 288. Weinberger goes even further in his memoir, where he omits any discussion of retaliation and alleges that he learned of the potential for a joint operation when the French minister of defense called to report that a unilateral French airstrike was imminent. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 161–62.

83   Note from McFarlane, "Decision Memo on Next Steps in Lebanon." The president reported a similar decision in a letter to Downing Street. See: Message from Reagan for Thatcher, Nov. 19, 1983, Chron File 8391397, Office of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Files, Reagan Library.

The president, sticking with his long-held theory of success, was confident that a demonstration of resolve would promote progress in Lebanon.
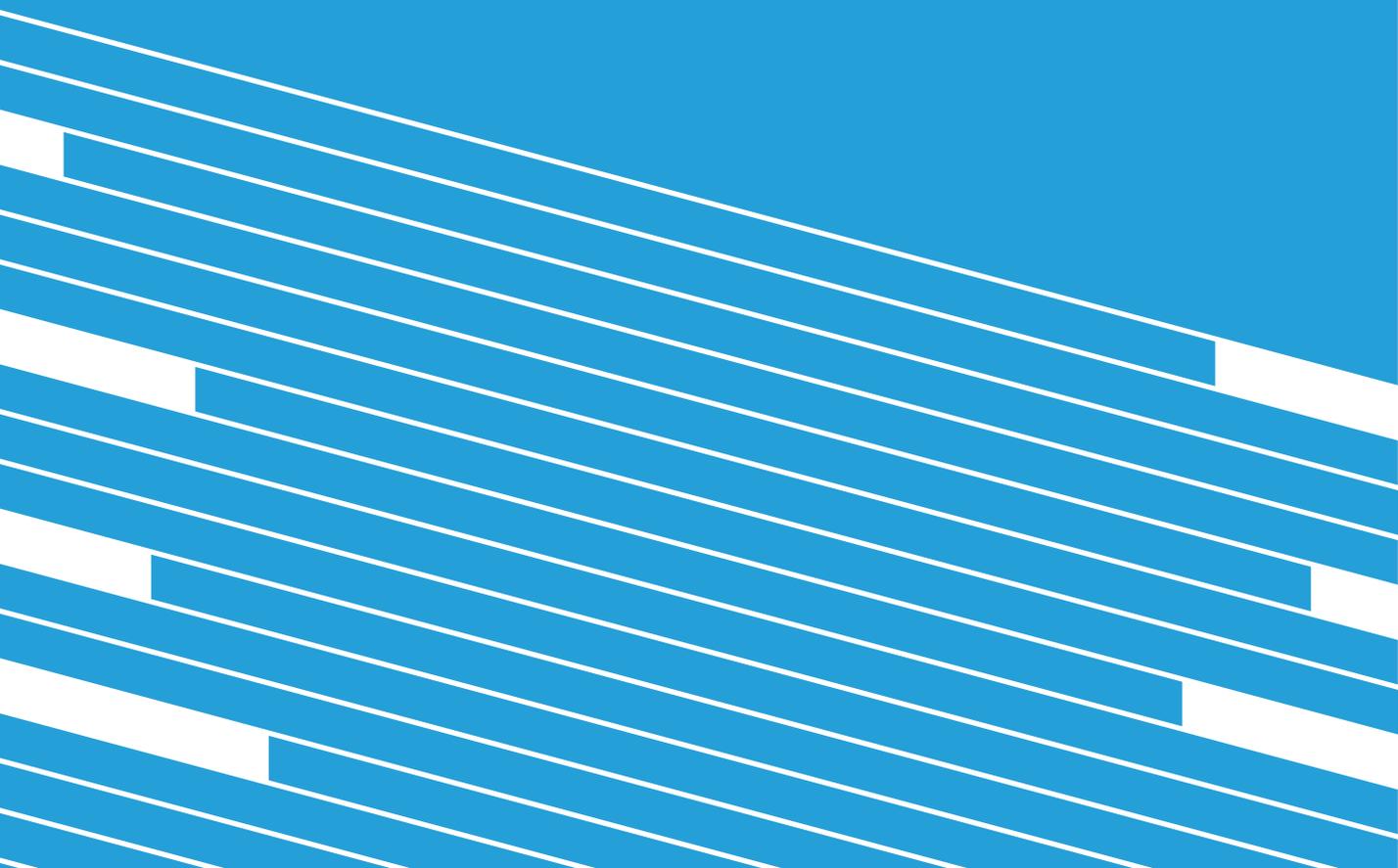
was already preparing to draw down operations. Indeed, Weinberger and Vessey redoubled their campaign to withdraw the Marines in the wake of the French strike and urged the president to reverse his decision to authorize more permissive rules of engagement.[84] But analysis of the Reagan administration's decision-making in November reveals that this encouragement was not indicative of a wider policy shift. Buoyed by optimistic assessments from Shultz and McFarlane, who continued to advocate for an assertive U.S. presence in Lebanon, the president overruled his military advisers and signed a second directive reiterating the importance of "aggressive self-defense."[85] Anticipating future casualties, he also ordered the Defense Department to "develop target data and arrangements" to facilitate "a future attack on short notice against suitable targets" and authorized new defensive measures to harden the Marines' position.[86] "I happen to believe taking out a few batteries might give [the Syrians] pause to think," he remarked in a diary entry on Dec. 1, 1983.[87] The president, sticking with his long-held theory of success, was confident that a demonstration of resolve would promote progress in Lebanon.

Reagan's words were tested only two days later, when a Syrian anti-aircraft unit fired at U.S. reconnaissance planes over eastern Lebanon.[88] It was not the first Syrian attempt to target U.S. aircraft — a similar incident on November 10 had prompted Weinberger to assure the media that such events were not "unusual or surprising"[89] — but this incident coincided with the president's approval of new rules of engagement authorizing the Marines to practice "vigorous self-defense."[90] A plan for rapid retaliation was therefore ready when news of the attempted downing reached the president. Without any of the hesitation that had characterized his earlier deliberations, Reagan, frustrated by the Syrians' continued intransigence and determined to demonstrate America's commitment to Lebanon, wasted little time ordering the Defense Department to plan and execute a retaliatory airstrike.[91] The president, Secretary of the Navy John Lehman later explained, was certain that the United States "would kick the shit out of the Syrians."[92]

Early the next morning, 28 bombers took off from the U.S.S. *Kennedy* and U.S.S. *Independence* with orders to strike three Syrian sites near Beirut, including a surface-to-air missile installation, an ammunition depot, and a radar system. The mission was straightforward, but a combination of miscommunications, technical challenges, and human errors caused the operation to go awry. Aided by Soviet surveillance, Syrian forces quickly identified, tracked, and fired on the U.S. planes, destroying two aircraft and killing one pilot. A second pilot, Lt. Robert Goodman Jr., was captured and detained by the Syrians for nearly a month, until the Rev. Jesse Jackson, an outspoken critic of the Reagan administration,

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84   See, for instance: Memorandum for Weinberger from John A. Wickham Jr. (acting chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), "NSDD-111 on Lebanon and the Middle East," Nov. 4, 1983, Box 91354, Lebanon Chronology (1); George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Scribner, 1993), 228; Donald Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2011), 14–16; Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 166; Crist, *Twilight War*, 150. The Defense Department's concerns were debated publicly. Michael Getler, "Lebanon Role Worries U.S. Military," *Washington Post*, Dec. 18, 1983.

85   McFarlane wrote to Reagan shortly after the French operation: "There has been progress, and the trends suggest more progress is in the offing." Quoted in Crist, *Twilight War*, 150. The National Security Council staff concurred, warning the national security adviser that "our continuing failure to conduct military action against terrorists in Lebanon will erode our credibility in the Middle East and beyond." Memorandum for McFarlane from Teicher, "Weekly Report," Nov. 18, 1983, Box 6, Chron (Official) November 1983, McFarlane Files, Reagan Library; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 228. For similar arguments, see: "Talking Points for Robert McFarlane," Dec. 1, 1983; Memorandum for McFarlane from Kemp, "NSPG Meeting," Dec. 1, 1983; Note for McFarlane from Poindexter, Nov. 30, 1983, Box 91306, NSPG 0077 14 Nov 1983, NSC Executive Secretariat National Security Planning Group Records, Reagan Library.

86   Note from McFarlane, "Decision Memo on Next Steps in Lebanon." The president reported a similar decision in a letter to Downing Street. Message from Reagan for Thatcher, Nov. 19, 1983, Chron File 8391397, Office of the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Files, Reagan Library.

87   Reagan, *Diaries*, 293.

88   Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 135.

89   Quoted in: Thomas L. Friedman, "Damascus Says Its Guns Fired At U.S. Planes," *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/11/world/damascus-says-its-guns-fired-at-us-planes.html.

90   Reagan approved the changes during a National Security Council meeting on Dec. 1 but did not sign the directive until Dec. 5. National Security Decision Directive 117, "Lebanon," Dec. 5, 1983, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/archives/reference/scanned-nsdds/nsdd117.pdf; Wills, *First War on Terrorism*, 76.

91   Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 166.

92   John F. Lehman, *Command of the Seas* (New York: Scribner, 1988), 322. Notably, Lehman had opposed Vessey and Weinberger and had supported retaliation for the barracks bombing.

flew to Damascus to negotiate his release.[93] The operation was an unequivocal failure. As Defense Intelligence Agency analysts summarized, "the damage inflicted by the airstrikes probably will not cause the Syrians to alter their present policies" on withdrawal and is "unlikely to deter Syria and its Lebanese allies from attacking US reconnaissance aircraft and marine positions."[94]

McFarlane had stuck to his theory of success during the weeks of deliberation after the barracks bombing, but the failed December raid forced him to re-evaluate his support for the Marine mission. The national security adviser's endorsement of the U.S. intervention had been premised on his confidence that the United States could, with sufficient application of military pressure, force Syria to make concessions for the simple reason that Damascus could not afford a direct confrontation. McFarlane recognized that the Defense Department's opposition precluded any possibility of a larger military operation, but he had held out hope that targeted reprisals, with their implicit threat of escalation, might serve as a reasonable alternative.[95] Meanwhile, reconciliation negotiations among Lebanon's diverse factions had stalled, threatening to spark a new bout of major fighting that was likely to overwhelm the already strained Lebanese army and reverse the limited gains painstakingly made over the previous year. "There were three loci of that strategy," he concluded, "and in each one we appeared to be failing."[96]

McFarlane's reversal broke the deadlock and provided the Defense Department with an opportunity to initiate an interagency discussion of possible withdrawal options. Throughout December, an interagency working group prepared a detailed plan of action to transition authority to the Lebanese government and gradually draw down the U.S. military presence. The proposal envisioned an accelerated training program to expand the Lebanese Armed Forces' area of operations and allow the Marines to move to more defensible positions along the southern border, where they would operate under expanded rules of engagement and continue to respond aggressively to any threats to their presence. With the enticement of an American withdrawal — the working group decided against setting a strict deadline — and the threat of a long-term U.S.-Israeli presence in Lebanon, U.S. negotiators hoped to extract concessions from the Syrians and secure at least some of Washington's objectives.[97]

These preparations for an incremental drawdown in U.S. military involvement coincided with a decline in public support for the peacekeeping mission. The "comfortable margin of approval" Reagan had secured with his October address winnowed over time, and by December 12 campaign pollsters began to warn of "a sharp reduction in the number of Americans who approve of the job the President is doing in Lebanon." The downward trend mirrored a simultaneous "dramatic shift" in public approval of the president's handling of foreign affairs, with a majority of Americans reporting for the first time that they disapproved of his response to the Beirut barracks bombing.[98] Sensing an opportunity, Reagan's political challengers seized on the failed raid as evidence that the administration was driving the United States toward war. Reagan looked

93   Geraghty, *Peacekeepers at War*; Memoranda for Reagan from McFarlane, "Ground and Air Situation in Lebanon 5 December 1983, 0930," and "Lebanon: Details of Weekend Strikes and International Relations," Dec. 5, 1983, RAC Box 8, Lebanon Documents (2 Dec 83 (Rumsfeld Cables) I (4), National Security Council Crisis Management Center Records, Reagan Library. For a firsthand account of the confusion aboard the carriers, see: George C. Wilson, "The Day We Fouled Up the Bombing of Lebanon," *Washington Post*, Sept. 7, 1986, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1986/09/07/the-day-we-fouled-up-the-bombing-of-lebanon/90b613a9-8fdd-4a8f-9261-40e53f4183c1/.

94   National Intelligence Daily for Dec. 5, 1983, CREST

95   In the days before the Dec. 3 raid, McFarlane had sought to leverage his personal relationship with the president to force the Joint Chiefs in line with his position on Lebanon. By all accounts, the meeting failed. Note for McFarlane from Poindexter (Eyes Only), Nov. 30, 1983, and "Talking Points for Robert McFarlane," Dec. 1, 1983, both in Box 91306, NSPG 0077 14 Nov 1983, NSC Executive Secretariat National Security Planning Group records.

96   McFarlane, *Special Trust*, 272.

97   Memorandum for McFarlane from Fortier, "Lebanon Political-Military Working Group," Dec. 8, 1983, RAC Box 7, Lebanon (6), Fortier Files, Reagan Library; Note from McFarlane, "Informal Group on Lebanon," Dec. 10, 1983, Box 6, Chron (Official) December 1983 (3), McFarlane Files, Reagan Library; Memorandum for McFarlane from Fortier, Dur, and Kemp, "Working Luncheon on Lebanon," Dec. 16, 1983, Box 7, Lebanon (7), Fortier Files, Reagan Library; Draft Memorandum for the President from John M. Poindexter, "Informal Discussion Papers on Lebanon Strategy," c. January 1983, Box 7, Lebanon (9), Fortier Files, Reagan Library; Cable to Donald Rumsfeld from the State Department, "Short-Term Strategy for Lebanon," Dec. 28, 1983, Box 7, Lebanon (8), Fortier Files, Reagan Library. A resulting non-paper is described in additional detail in Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 168–69.

98   Memorandum for Meese, Baker, and Deaver from Wirthlin, "The Situation in Lebanon," Dec. 12, 1983, Box 685, Meese Collection, Hoover Institution. Republican National Committee pollsters concluded that Reagan's address had "reversed" public opinion, with 58 percent of Americans surveyed after the speech reporting that they approved of the U.S. mission in Lebanon.

"trigger-happy and reckless," according to Sen. Alan Cranston, one of five Democratic Party challengers.[99]

Yet, neither McFarlane's reversal nor the turn in public opinion compelled Reagan to change course. Although the president intended to launch his re-election campaign shortly after the new year, he appeared unfazed by the prospect of an electoral backlash. Just as he had in the immediate aftermath of the barracks bombing, Reagan dismissed public criticism of his administration's policy as slander by a hostile press corps, and he insisted that the United States had an obligation to maintain its peacekeeping efforts until internal stability was established and the withdrawal of foreign forces secured.[100] He had great faith in the psychological power of the Marine presence and still believed that a few well-placed shells from the U.S.S. *New Jersey*'s 16-inch guns would force a political resolution.[101] In short, his theory of success remained unchanged.

The president's confidence in his chosen path in Lebanon was sustained by optimistic assessments from Shultz, who maintained that U.S. objectives were viable and that congressional and public support for the intervention could be secured through concerted outreach. Reagan and Shultz had grown closer over the fall, and the president took to meeting privately with his secretary of state to discuss each week's events. Although they discussed a range of topics, Shultz's advice followed a general theme: the need to stay firm and demonstrate American mettle. Even as Syrian opposition hardened and factional fighting around Beirut intensified, Shultz maintained that the United States could achieve its objectives if it persevered and presented a unified, unyielding front.[102] Reagan agreed. "We see pretty much eye to eye on our problems in Lebanon," he noted in his diary.[103]

Thus, while the Defense Department prepared plans for withdrawal, the president continued to authorize plans to harden and expand U.S. involvement in Lebanon. On Dec. 5, 1983 — just a day after the failed air raid — Reagan overruled, for a second time, his military advisers' recommendations and signed a presidential directive explicitly reaffirming his decision to modify the rules of engagement for the deployed marines. This time, he stipulated that the Marines be provided naval surface and tactical air support to carry out "vigorous self-defense" against either the source of enemy fire or "discrete military targets in unpopulated areas which are organizationally associated with the firing units."[104] To reassure European partners, he dispatched Shultz to Brussels a few days later with a message affirming America's commitment to Lebanon and orders to discuss plans to strengthen the peacekeeping mission's support for the Lebanese government.[105] U.S. forces would remain in the country, despite the danger, until a political resolution was reached or "there was such a collapse of order that it was absolutely certain no solution to the problem" in Lebanon would be reached, he told reporters later in the month. He remained confident, however, that success was possible, adding that "we're making more progress than appears on the surface."[106]

The Deterioration of the Lebanese Armed Forces: Feb. 4–7, 1984

The fractures within the Reagan administration deepened in December and January. "There seem

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99 The media reported heavily on the airstrikes and their aftermath. See, for example: "Five Democratic Candidates Criticize Reagan For Air Strikes," *New York Times*, Dec. 5, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/05/world/five-democratic-candidates-criticize-reagan-for-air-strikes.html; Steven V. Roberts, "Critics in Congress Declare Reagan Is Heading for War," *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/06/world/critics-in-congress-declare-reagan-is-heading-for-war.html; Hedrick Smith, "Lebanon Rekindles U.S. Foreign Policy Troubles," *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/11/weekinreview/lebanon-rekindles-us-foreign-policy-troubles.html.

100 Reagan, *Diaries*, 294–95; "Shultz Defends U.S.-Israel Policy as Ceasefire Holds in Lebanon," *Associated Press*, Dec. 11, 1983; Steven R. Weisman, "Reagan Predicts Role Till Beirut Stands or Falls," *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/15/world/reagan-predicts-role-till-beirut-stands-or-falls.html.

101 Reagan, *Diaries*, 298–99. Reagan mentioned the *New Jersey* often in his diary, praising its perceived ability to police the cease-fire in Lebanon.

102 Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 228–31; Memorandum for Reagan from Shultz, "Deputy Secretary Dam's Meeting with Speaker O'Neill and his Ad Hoc Group on Lebanon," Jan. 4, 1984, Box 91666, Chron–Howard J. Teicher, January 1984 [1], Teicher Files, Reagan Library; Memorandum for Reagan from McFarlane, "Putting the Marines Back Aboard Ships," Dec. 21,1983, The Reagan Files, https://www.thereaganfiles.com/831221-secdef-to-rr.pdf; Reagan, *Diaries*, 298, 301. For more on the Shultz-Reagan relationship, see: Leslie H. Gelb, "Shultz, With Tough Line, Is Now Key Voice in Crisis," *New York Times*, Nov. 7, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/07/world/shultz-with-tough-line-is-now-key-voice-in-crisis.html.

103 Reagan, *Diaries*, 295, 298–300.

104 National Security Decision Directive 117, "Lebanon," Dec. 5, 1983.

105 Alex Brummer, "Shultz says US sticks to Lebanon role," *Guardian,* Dec. 6, 1983; Lou Cannon and David Hoffman, "Use of Force Viewed Necessary for Solution," *Washington Post,* Dec. 8, 1983; David Ignatius, "Europeans in Peacekeeping Force Seem Willing to Back U.S. Strategy in Lebanon," *Wall Street Journal,* Dec. 8, 1983.

106 Weisman, "Reagan Predicts Role Till Beirut Stands or Falls"; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 228–29. In his weekly radio address a few days earlier, Reagan pledged to "redouble" U.S. efforts to resolve the situation in Lebanon, vowing that the Marines would withdraw only "once internal stability is established and the withdrawal of all foreign forces is secured." See: Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Situation in Lebanon," Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, Dec. 10, 1983, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/121083a.

to be at least two opposing hypotheses about how we are doing," one National Security Council staffer wrote, summarizing the prevailing sentiment.

> One is optimistic in flavor; it assumes that things are naturally falling into place and that with a little perseverance we will be able to achieve our broad objectives. ... The other is fundamentally pessimistic, assuming that the situation continues to be structured unfavorably, and that the most that we can hope for is an implicit set of understandings between Israel and Syria ... and a face-saving way to get out of Lebanon.[107]

Indeed, evidence that the administration's efforts were failing continued to accumulate. On December 23, the CIA published a Special National Intelligence Estimate summarizing the intelligence community's assessment of the quandary. "Despite recent air attacks and naval gunfire on Syrian positions," the report noted, "Syria appears unwilling to back down." Although the State Department theorized that robust American action would inspire political progress, the report argued that Syrian President Hafez Assad appeared confident that he could "afford to pay a higher price than either the United States or Israel" and predicted that he would respond to any effort to expand U.S. involvement with a new round of terrorist attacks. Worse still, the intelligence estimate forecast that further U.S. reprisals would exacerbate Lebanon's confessional polarization, opening new opportunities for Syria to exploit local grievances against the government and quickening the country's partition.[108] The report concluded that a continued U.S. military presence could only worsen the crisis, not resolve it.[109]

The same day the CIA published its intelligence estimate, an independent Defense Department investigation released its findings from a two-month

inquiry into the October barracks bombing.[110] The Long Commission, named for its chairman, Adm. Robert Long, identified systemic failures across the command chain but concluded that the tragedy was a direct result of the peacekeepers' mandate.[111] Weinberger, who had requested the investigation

Yet, none of these things — not the intelligence community's dreary assessment, the Long Commission report, or the popular and congressional uproar — persuaded Reagan to change course.

in part to bolster his arguments for withdrawal, seized upon its conclusions as further evidence of the mission's futility.[112] As he explained in a letter to Reagan summarizing the findings, the investigation confirmed "the near impossibility of carrying out the assigned mission without risking such a catastrophe."[113] The administration's best option, he insisted, would be to withdraw. The commission was one more tool the secretary of defense used to propagate his theory of failure regarding Lebanon, though its report offered few details about how and when a withdrawal should take place even as it questioned the wisdom of the deployment.

Weinberger's message was soon amplified on Capitol Hill, where congressional critics of the intervention seized on the Long Commission's findings as evidence that Reagan was driving the United States toward war with Syria.[114] Even once-sympathetic leaders, such as Charles H. Percy, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and House Speaker Tip O'Neill, who had helped the White House avert a War Powers Act debate over the Marines' deployment, returned home for the holiday recess to find constituents angry and confused about the purpose of the Marines' mission. Although Congress would not

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107 National Security Council, "Taking Stock in Lebanon," Dec. 15, 1983, Box 7, Folder "Lebanon (9)," Fortier Files, Reagan Library.

108 "Confessional" refers to the factional communities within Lebanon, which were divided along important historical, social, and religious bonds of affiliation.

109 Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE), "Implications of the Military Balance of Power in Lebanon," SNIE 11/35/36-38, Dec. 23, 1983, CREST, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP86T00302R000701080010-8.pdf.

110 On the Long Commission's origins and composition, see: Jordan Tama, *Terrorism and National Security Reform: How Commissions Can Drive Change During Crises* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 75–88.

111 "Report of The DOD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983"; Memorandum for Reagan from McFarlane, "Long Commission report on October 23 Bombing," Dec. 23, 1983, RAC Box 7, Lebanon (8), Fortier Files, Reagan Library.

112 Tama, *Terrorism and National Security Reform*, 79–80.

113 Memorandum for Reagan from Weinberger, "Long Commission report on October 23 Bombing," Dec. 23, 1983, RAC Box 7, Lebanon (8).

114 For more on the congressional reaction, see: Tama, *Terrorism and National Security Reform*, 81–85; Kriner, *After the Rubicon*, 218–20.

resume session until January 24, allies on the Hill cautioned that the Democratic leadership was already preparing to reopen the War Powers debate.[115]

All the while, popular support for the intervention continued to plummet. The media reported extensively on the Long Commission's findings and the administration's infighting, compounding the sense that the White House had stumbled into a quagmire.[116] Approval of the president's overall performance in Lebanon sank 10 points over four weeks, dropping to 33 percent by January 30. For the first time since the Marines' deployment 18 months earlier, a White House-commissioned poll found a majority of Americans favored "an immediate withdrawal of all U.S. forces" over the status quo.[117]

Yet, none of these things — not the intelligence community's dreary assessment, the Long Commission report, or the popular and congressional uproar — persuaded Reagan to change course.[118] Three days after the Long Commission report was released, the president convened a news conference to silence rumors that his administration was preparing to leave Lebanon. "If there is to be blame, it properly rests here in this office and with this president," he told reporters, putting his reputation on the line. But he refused to second-guess the value of the Marine presence, chiding naysayers for not realizing the "problem … will not disappear if we run from it." Reiterating the message he had espoused in the days after the bombing, he asked the American public to allow the marines time to complete their mission, which had already, he stressed, helped to protect the Lebanese government, strengthen its

army, and "lay the foundation for a future peace." It would be hard, he acknowledged, but America's goals in Lebanon were worth the cost.[119]

This was more than savvy political rhetoric. Reagan's public statements were consistent with his long-held theory of the mission and his personal conviction that the crisis presented a test of American resolve. His political aides, worried that a congressional standoff might harm the president's re-election campaign, implored Reagan to distance himself from the operation. By late January, White House Chief of Staff James Baker, who previously had supported the decision to intervene, had gone so far as to urge the president to disengage the United States from the messy conflict.[120] But Reagan was determined to see the mission through. Encouraged by optimistic reports from his new special envoy to the Middle East, Donald Rumsfeld, and conversations with Shultz, the president resolved to buy time for the ongoing negotiations to succeed.[121]

Reagan also recognized, however, that he could no longer ignore the criticism mounting on Capitol Hill. To stave off a War Powers Act debate, he dispatched senior officials to build support for an open-ended U.S. military role in Lebanon, following a political strategy first employed in the wake of the October bombing. Throughout January, McFarlane, Shultz, Undersecretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger, and even Reagan himself met with leading members of both houses of Congress to stress the importance of the Marines' mission and push back against calls for a precipitous withdrawal.[122] Their efforts were persuasive: As House Minority Leader Robert H. Michel told reporters after one session, he was

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115 Margaret Shapiro and John Goshko, "Reagan Moves to Bolster Hill Support on Lebanon," *Washington Post,* Jan. 5, 1984; Philip Taubman, "O'Neill Considers Backing a Change in Marine Mission," *New York Times*, Dec. 30, 1983, https://www.nytimes.com/1983/12/30/world/o-neill-considers-backing-a-change-in-marine-mission.html; Memorandum and Attachments from McFarlane for Reagan, "NSPG Meeting on Next Steps in Lebanon, Tuesday, January 3, 1984, White House Situation Room," Reagan Files; David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War Against Terrorism* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), 147; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 229.

116 Tama, *Terrorism and National Security Reform*, 82–84.

117 Memorandum by Wirthlin, "The Situation in Lebanon," Jan. 30, 1984, Box 685, 11, Meese Collection, Hoover Institution.

118 Reagan described a meeting to discuss the Long Commission report as an "easy" day, noting he was only "worried about the effect of this on families that lost loved ones." Reagan, *Diaries,* 301–2. For his views on public polls, see page 311.

119 Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters on the Pentagon Report on the Security of United States Marines in Lebanon," Reagan Library, Dec. 27, 1983, https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/122783a.

120 Lou Cannon and Carl M. Cannon, *Reagan's Disciple: George W. Bush's Troubled Quest for a Presidential Legacy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 151–52; Kriner, *After the Rubicon*, 224–25.

121 Reagan, *Diaries*, 298, 301, 304–5; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 228–31.

122 Memorandum for Reagan from Shultz, "Deputy Secretary Dam's Meeting with Speaker O'Neill and his Ad Hoc Group on Lebanon," and Memorandum for Reagan from McFarlane, "Ken Dam's Meeting with Speaker O'Neill and Other House Leaders," c. Jan. 6, 1984, both in Box 91666, Chron–Howard J. Teicher, January 1984 [1]; Memorandum for McFarlane from Fortier, "Your Hill Briefings on Lebanon," Jan. 3, 1984, RAC Box 7, Folder Lebanon (9), all Fortier Files, Reagan Library. Memorandum and Attachments for Reagan from McFarlane, "NSPG Meeting on Next Steps in Lebanon, Tuesday, January 3, 1984, White House Situation Room," Reagan Files. National Security Council staff followed up with meetings and background papers to clarify U.S. policy and explain the "consequences of a precipitous withdrawal." Memorandum for McFarlane from Fortier, "Maintaining the Speaker's Support on Lebanon," Jan. 5, 1984, RAC Box 7, Lebanon (9); Memorandum for McFarlane from Teicher, "Weekly Report," Jan. 27, 1984, Box 91666, Chron–Howard J. Teicher, January 1984 [1], Teicher Files, Reagan Library.

"satisfied with what I have heard today that what we're doing is the right thing."[123] Reagan had won other tough congressional battles, and he saw no reason why a reasonable compromise could not be secured.

To further assuage congressional concerns, and to refute allegations that the administration planned to deploy U.S. troops indefinitely, Reagan directed Shultz, Weinberger, and Vessey on January 26 to prepare a timetable for the phased drawdown of the marines deployed in Lebanon. Six days later, he signed a national security directive approving, in principle, preparations to replace the Marines with a smaller, more mobile anti-terrorist force operating under more permissive rules of engagement. Paired with an accelerated military modernization program for the Lebanese Armed Forces, the residual force was intended to demonstrate U.S. staying power and maintain the administration's ability to strike at Syrian or surrogate forces as needed. To further enhance the safety of the marines in the interim, the directive granted U.S. naval forces the authority to provide

message to adversaries if it cut and ran. Reagan agreed, and he instructed Rumsfeld to fly to Beirut for consultations, insisting the drawdown plan could not be implemented unless the Lebanese government approved.[125] Determined to maintain the administration's flexibility to defend U.S. interests in Lebanon by force if the need arose, the White House continued to fight a House resolution calling for withdrawal. Meanwhile, the State Department and National Security Council staff explored a range of options to increase pressure on Syria and improve U.S. targeting abilities.[126] Looking back on the February 1 decision to approve, in principle, a smaller replacement force, Rumsfeld compared the administration's options to those of a pilot of a damaged plane: "We could either crash land with a precipitous withdrawal or gradually reduce our presence in a controlled landing."[127] In this, the intervention's advocates were aided by an inadvertent gift from the Joint Chiefs of Staff who, for reasons that remain unclear, dallied in preparing timetables for withdrawal, even as Weinberger urged them to set a deadline for the Marines' immediate departure.[128]

Against this backdrop, Reagan's request for withdrawal options appears to have been part of a political strategy designed to preserve the administration's maneuverability by pre-empting a congressional effort to impose a strict deadline for the Marines' departure. In comments to the media, Reagan continued to resist

After months of debate, the collapse of the Lebanese army provided decisive evidence that the U.S. strategy in Lebanon had failed.

gunfire and air support against any units conducting a hostile attack on U.S. or Multinational Force personnel and facilities, stretching the definition of self-defense.[124]

Still, the president was not ready to abandon his goals in Lebanon. Shultz continued to stress the dangers of a premature withdrawal, warning that the United States would send the wrong

calls to set a timeline, claiming that the Marines would remain in Lebanon until the withdrawal of foreign forces had been secured and the Lebanese government proved capable of maintaining security independently. "As long as there is a chance for peace, the mission remains the same," he snapped at reporters on February 2, just days after announcing his re-election campaign. His critics "may be willing

123 Shapiro and Goshko, "Reagan Moves to Bolster Hill Support on Lebanon."

124 Memorandum for the Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense, Director of Central Intelligence, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from Robert McFarlane, "Next Steps in Lebanon," Feb. 1, 1984, CREST, https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP10M00666R000200480001-7.pdf; Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 230.

125 Reagan, *Diaries*, 312; David Hoffman, "Administration Credibility Under Strain: Plans, Pronouncements on Mideast Contradictory," *Washington Post*, Feb. 12, 1984.

126 Cable from Donald Rumsfeld to Lawrence Eagleburger, "Next Steps in Lebanon," Jan. 31, 1984; Cable from Donald Rumsfeld to Bud McFarlane, James Poindexter, and Lawrence Eagleburger, "Middle East Mission–Draft NSDD–Rumsfeld Comments," Jan. 31, 1984, all in the Rumsfeld Papers, http://papers.rumsfeld.com/library/. Each were marked "eyes only".

127 Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, 28.

128 In his memoir, the defense secretary goes on at length about his efforts to hurry the Joint Chiefs. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 168–69.

to surrender, but I'm not."[129]

Just as Reagan announced his intention to stay in Lebanon, the National Salvation Front, a coalition of anti-government militias, launched a coordinated assault on Lebanese army positions in and around Beirut.[130] By February 3, the coalition had seized control of Beirut's southern district and made significant gains in the capital's eastern and center sectors. That day, Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal militia, called on all Muslim leaders to resign from the government and for all nationalist soldiers in the Lebanese Armed Forces to abandon their posts. Others had issued similar calls to little avail, but the message was now underscored by the country's heaviest fighting since 1976. An entire brigade deserted at once, allowing Shia and Druze militias to occupy West Beirut. Soon after, the militias seized the finance ministry and national radio station, wresting control from the few remaining government units. As the militias advanced, desertion rates skyrocketed. Within a week, the Lebanese army was shattered.[131]

After months of debate, the collapse of the Lebanese army provided decisive evidence that the U.S. strategy in Lebanon had failed. The reconstruction of the Lebanese Armed Forces had formed the foundation of the Reagan administration's strategy since September 1982, and its collapse provided critics of the intervention with concrete evidence that U.S. objectives in Lebanon were no longer viable. Amid reports of escalating fighting, McFarlane convened a meeting of the National Security Policy Group on February 7 to discuss the prospect of a complete and rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces. The conversation was dominated by the intervention's critics. Shultz, now the Multinational Force's lone advocate in the Cabinet, was in Grenada, and Reagan,

his attention now focused on his re-election campaign, was stumping through the Southwest. Undersecretary of State Eagleburger fought a losing battle to keep the Marines in Beirut, but he was overruled quickly by Weinberger and Vice President George H.W. Bush, who chaired the session in the president's absence.

An early supporter of the intervention, Bush had been affected deeply by the October bombing.[132] He visited the marines shortly after the attack, an experience he described as "one of [the] most difficult and emotional assignments" of his long career. He returned to Washington convinced that future attacks were likely, that the Lebanese government was unable or unwilling to manage the problems ahead, and that a plan for the withdrawal of U.S. forces was needed urgently.[133] Sensitive to the limitations of his office, Bush usually demurred from intervening in other Cabinet members' debates, but he now backed Weinberger's recommendation to disengage. That afternoon, he called Reagan to report that all except the State Department believed the Marines should redeploy from Lebanon.[134]

The collapse of the Lebanese Armed Forces cast the president's options in a new light. Without a local partner, Reagan's preferred strategy of gradual, incremental pressure paired with an accelerated training program was no longer feasible. He was left with only two options: a massive expansion of the U.S. ground commitment in Lebanon, a prospect that would shatter the illusion that the Marines were neutral in the civil conflict and provoke a grueling fight with Congress over presidential war powers, or a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces. Even in the best of circumstances, Reagan, wary of repeating the errors of Vietnam, had little stomach for the first option. Now, after months of resistance,

129 Quoted in: Rich Jaroslovsky and Albert Hunt, "Digging In: Reagan Toughens Line on Troops in Lebanon And Chides His Critics," *Wall Street Journal,* Feb. 3, 1984. For illustrative examples demonstrating Reagan's consistency, see: Benjamin Taylor, "Reagan Shrugs Off Lebanon Pullout Call," *Boston Globe,* Feb. 2, 1984; Leslie H. Gelb, "Aides Say Reagan Foreign Policy Will Survive Democrats' Attacks," *New York Times*, Feb. 3, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/02/03/us/aides-say-reagan-foreign-policy-will-survive-democrats-attacks.html; "Reagan, O'Neill Trade Barbs Over Lebanon Troops," Feb. 4, 1984, *Chicago Tribune.*

130 Edgar O'Ballance, *Civil War in Lebanon, 1975–92* (New York: St. Martin's Press: 1998), 136; Elie A. Salem, *Violence and Diplomacy in Lebanon: The Troubled Years, 1982–1988* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1995), 135–46; Rumsfeld, *Known and Unknown*, 27; Reagan, *Diaries*, 306–7.

131 This assessment draws on: O'Ballance, *Civil War in Lebanon*, 137; Oren Barak, *The Lebanese Army: A National Institution in a Divided Society* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 131; Yosef Olmert, "Lebanon," *Middle East Contemporary Survey* 8 (1986): 551; Omri Nir, *Nabih Berri and Lebanese Politics* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 50–52; and Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 231.

132 Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 436.

133 George H.W. Bush, *All The Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 331. The importance of the moment was evident to those observing Bush in the field. Marine commander Timothy Geraghty later recalled that while presenting Purple Hearts to wounded men, the vice president "was obviously moved by their sacrifice." Geraghty, *Peacekeepers at War*, 111–12.

134 Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph*, 230–31; Wills, *First War on Terrorism*, 8; Howard Teicher and Gayle Radley Teicher, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm: America's Flawed Vision in the Middle East from Nixon to Bush* (New York: William Morrow, 1993), 291.

he bowed to his advisers' apparent consensus and agreed to bring the marines home.[135]

Preparations for a complete and rapid disengagement were completed quickly. On February 9, the Marines began to evacuate support elements and equipment from the Beirut airport, and

So long as there appeared to be a viable ally on the ground, Reagan believed his objectives were feasible and progress was being made, albeit incrementally.

the final withdrawal commenced on February 18. At 6 a.m. on Feb. 26, 1984, control of the Marines' final position was turned over to the Lebanese Armed Forces.[136] The next day, administration officials announced that the United States would no longer play an active role in efforts to promote political reconciliation in Lebanon. An announcement soon followed that military equipment deliveries would be suspended.[137] Eighteen months after it had started, and four months after the deadly truck bombing, the U.S. intervention in Lebanon ended, its aims unmet.

Three Counterfactuals

This new history of the final months of the U.S. intervention in Lebanon reveals that Reagan's faith in the Marines' mission was remarkably resilient. Even as public attitudes toward the intervention soured — and the announcement of his re-election campaign neared — the president continued to support proposals for an open-ended U.S. military presence in Lebanon. Bolstered by optimistic assessments from Shultz and others, Reagan retained trust in his established theory of success: that U.S. troops would stabilize the country, revitalize the central government, and bring a peaceful resolution to the Lebanese conflict. Even as U.S. public and congressional support waivered, Reagan remained confident in his ability to sustain the operation, and he dismissed signs of a future political backlash as media manipulation. Only in February 1984, when the collapse of the Lebanese government and the disintegration of its armed forces made clear that success was unlikely, did Reagan ultimately relent to the Defense Department's pressure to withdraw. In short, the outcome of the Reagan administration's deliberations in the months following the barracks bombing was in no way preordained by the scale of the Marines' losses or expectations of political backlash.

Indeed, the barracks bombing may have had the immediate counterintuitive effect of hardening the president's resolve. Consider what might have unfolded had the Marine sentries disabled the truck before it reached the gates of the barracks, or if the detonator had failed. What if the driver, confronted with certain death, had instead driven away?

The similarities between the policymakers' deliberations before and after the bombing suggest that the Reagan administration likely would have defaulted to maintaining the status quo. For weeks before the attack, Reagan's foreign policy team had grappled with the question of whether to sustain the Marine mission in Lebanon or withdraw forces offshore. Just as they were after the bombing, senior officials had been divided into two factions: One, led by Shultz and McFarlane, advocated expanding the Marines' responsibilities; and a second, led by Weinberger and Vessey, pushed for rapid disengagement. They presented contradictory assessments of the situation and the prospects for success. Their arguments before the bombing differed little from their arguments in the wake of the attack: While the State Department, worried about Syria's assertiveness, pushed for limited strikes to encourage concessions and establish clear "red lines," the Defense Department remained fundamentally pessimistic about prospects for a negotiated settlement. The National Security Policy Group failed to reach consensus at meetings on October 14 and 18, and preparations for a third

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135 Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph,* 230–31; Wills, *First War on Terrorism*, 8; Teicher and Teicher, *Twin Pillars to Desert Storm*, 291. Whether Reagan understood that he had authorized the complete and rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces, rather than the phased transition outlined in the Feb. 1 National Security Decision Directive, is unclear. Although transcripts of Bush's call to Reagan remain classified, evidence that similar proposals were studied in the days after the National Security Policy Group decision suggest the president may have held out hope of maintaining a limited military presence in Beirut. Indeed, White House press guidance distributed over the next several days described the administration's decision as a phased drawdown that would stretch "over the next several months depending on the situation." Memorandum to Shultz, Weinberger, and Vessey from McFarlane, "Memorandum for the Record: Decisions Taken and Actions Required at SSG Meeting Thursday, February 9, 1984–5:15-7:25 p.m.," Box 91834, William Burns Files, Reagan Library; "Senior Staff Meeting Action Items, 2/08/83," and "Senior Staff Meeting Action Items, 2/09/83," Box 72, Action Items 1984 January–June, James A. Baker Papers, Princeton University Library.

136 Frank, *U.S. Marines in Lebanon,* 135–38.

137 Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States,* 143–44.

session to review the rules of engagement were underway when the barracks were attacked.[138] Had the third meeting occurred, and had the bombing not taken place, the discussion likely would have remained gridlocked. Weinberger and Vessey still would have opposed the mission as unsustainable, while the rest of the president's senior national security aides would have continued pushing for an expansion.

In the absence of a cataclysm like the Beirut barracks bombing, Reagan would probably have continued to postpone a decision on whether to expand or terminate the U.S. intervention. While he remained committed, in principle, to achieving America's objectives in Lebanon, the president was preoccupied in October by preparations for a U.S. invasion of Grenada and heightened tensions with the Soviet Union.[139] Reagan's distaste for mediating between his advisers, particularly over issues unrelated to U.S.-Soviet relations, is well recorded. Moreover, he had already avoided repeated efforts to redefine the U.S. mission in Lebanon despite sustained pressure from his closest advisers. Indeed, the president had approved only two significant modifications in the Marines' posture over the mission's first 13 months: the first, in April 1982, was implemented in the wake of the deadly embassy bombing, and the second, in September 1983, came only after McFarlane submitted dire reports (mocked by other officials as a "Sky is Falling" approach) suggesting the imminent collapse of the Lebanese government.

Rather than precipitating a withdrawal, the October 23 bombing may have had the unexpected consequence of hardening the U.S. military presence in Lebanon. By heightening the Multinational Force's perceived significance — and magnifying the perceived credibility costs of withdrawal — the attack dramatized Shultz and McFarlane's warnings and convinced Reagan of the need to demonstrate resolve. Indeed, the bombing, in which an unknown assailant killed sleeping peacekeepers, played into Reagan's theory of the conflict as a test of U.S. ability and willingness to promote peace, and it deepened his conviction that his administration had both a moral and a strategic imperative to act. In an alternative scenario in which the bombing failed, the president's waning

interest may have sapped his resistance to Defense Department proposals to dial down U.S. operations incrementally. A similar dynamic had allowed Weinberger to order the Marines' premature withdrawal in September 1982. Having succeeded in this tactic before, the defense secretary likely would have attempted it again as the deployment faded against the backdrop of success in Grenada and an upcoming election campaign. This possibility challenges the notion that the bombing catalyzed a decision to terminate the American mission, and it suggests that U.S. losses may have compelled the intervention's established advocates to accept a higher risk of future casualties.

Consider a second counterfactual: Would a more successful (and less costly) raid in December have altered the timing or character of the U.S. withdrawal? At minimum, such an operation would have confirmed America's presumed air superiority, strengthened Shultz's hand in the event of future reprisals, and offered temporary encouragement to Reagan. Had it succeeded in coercing Syria to suspend its harassment of U.S. forces, as past punishments had, it may also have delayed McFarlane's defection. As a demonstration of American military might, it may also have rallied the public and bolstered support for the intervention, thereby mitigating, or even reversing, the December polling results. On the other hand, a successful operation might have strengthened Weinberger and Vessey's arguments against expanding the Marines' ground presence by demonstrating that offshore naval assets offered a sufficient deterrent against Syrian obstructionism. The raid may, therefore, have provided the Defense Department with additional evidence that the administration could redeploy the Marines offshore at little reputational cost.

Ultimately, a successful air raid is unlikely to have changed the trajectory of U.S. policy toward Lebanon significantly. It may have sustained McFarlane's support, but it would not have altered the overall balance of opinion within the administration, where senior officials were wedded to their established theories of the mission's success. Yet, this counterfactual does highlight how the negative repercussions of the botched raid were insufficient on their own to compel the

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138 For an illustration of the continuities, see: Memorandum for Reagan from Shultz, Oct. 5, 1983; Memorandum for Reagan from Clark, Oct. 13, 1983; and Memorandum for Reagan from McFarlane, Oct. 17, 1983, Box 91306, NSPG0073 18 Oct 1983, NSC Executive Secretariat records; Memorandum for McFarlane from Weinberger, "US Policy in Lebanon and the Middle East," Oct. 21, 1983, RAC Box 7, Lebanon (5), Fortier Files, Reagan Library.

139 Some have speculated that the administration's concurrent intervention in Grenada, which commenced two days after the bombing, was designed to distract the public from the disaster in Beirut. This theory ignores the facts that the president had authorized the Grenada operation *before* the attack in Lebanon and that lead military elements were already en route to the island when the bombing occurred (which complicated efforts to relieve the shaken marines in Beirut). If Operation Urgent Fury's success may have dampened the public's reaction to the bombing in Lebanon, it was by chance, not design.

withdrawal of the Marines. That dubious credit belongs to another event.

Finally, imagine what might have occurred if the Lebanese Armed Forces had repelled the February offensive. By that point, U.S. policymakers harbored few illusions about the Lebanese Armed Forces' strength, which was weakened by endemic corruption, virulent sectarian divisions, and poor leadership and training. Nevertheless, Reagan and Shultz had held out hope that, with sufficient U.S. support, it might still serve as a stabilizing force. Looking back years later, U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Robert Dillon stressed that "the Army was one of the few places where there was still cooperation between Maronites, Shiites, Sunnis, Druze, Greek Catholics and others," even if the balance of power was misaligned. With sufficient training and better leadership, U.S. officials hoped, the Lebanese military could overcome its internal divisions and serve as a beacon for national reconciliation.[140]

Two scenarios are therefore conceivable. In the first, Reagan, reluctant to abandon a partner that he had, only days earlier, publicly pledged to support, might have expanded U.S. assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces, just as he had in previous instances when he feared they were nearing exhaustion. In September 1983, for instance, he authorized the use of U.S. naval gunfire in support of embattled Lebanese units fighting in the Shouf, and noted the army's resurgence with pride in his nightly diary entries.[141] So long as there appeared to be a viable ally on the ground, Reagan believed his objectives were feasible and progress was being made, albeit incrementally. And so long as a semblance of a central government apparatus remained, he retained hope that the United States might promote national reconciliation without incurring direct responsibility for the resolution of the Lebanese factions' grievances.

Alternatively, the intensity of the fighting in February might have persuaded the president that the Marines were, as Weinberger and Vessey had long argued, ill-equipped to implement their mission in an increasingly hostile environment. Yet, even if the National Salvation Front offensive had compelled Reagan to consider withdrawal, the Lebanese Armed Forces' success in repelling the attackers would have bolstered McFarlane's plan to taper operations gradually. Such an event would have dramatized advocates' claims that the Marines were indispensable to the goal of stabilizing Lebanon and appealed to the president's desire to kick the "Vietnam Syndrome" and demonstrate the value and reliability of partnering with the United States.[142] Confronted with a choice between rapid disengagement and a phased transfer of responsibility, Shultz and Eagleburger would have thrown their support behind the national security adviser, establishing a majority opinion that Reagan would have been unlikely to refute. In this scenario, the U.S. departure from Lebanon would have stretched into the spring and been paired with an accelerated training effort to prepare the Lebanese Armed Forces to assume the Marines' former positions. The timing and character of the withdrawal would have been quite different.

Of course, none of these possibilities came to pass and therefore we cannot know for certain what this alternative history may have yielded. Nonetheless, analysis of the historical record provides strong evidence to reconsider the causal link between the Marine barracks bombing and the ultimate U.S. departure from Lebanon. Instead, the record suggests that the loss of a viable local partner was the true motivation for the ultimate decision to leave Beirut.

Conclusion

This new history of the U.S. military withdrawal from Lebanon challenges the common emphasis on casualties as the determining factor in American decisions to correct course or terminate military interventions. Contrary to established narratives, neither the October 1983 truck bombing nor the perceived fluctuations in public attitudes toward the peacekeeping mission in Lebanon were significant factors in the Reagan administration's decisions of whether, when, or how to end the peacekeeping mission. The loss of 241 marines heightened policymakers' perceptions of the human and political costs of a continued military presence in Lebanon, but it also deepened divisions within the administration over future U.S. involvement in the country.

In particular, the attack emboldened those who opposed the effort, most notably Defense Secretary Weinberger and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of

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140 Interview of Robert S. Dillon by Charles Stuart Kennedy, May 17, 1990, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. For the importance placed on the U.S. modernization effort, see: Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States,* chap. 4.

141 National Security Decision Directive 103 and "Addendum to NSDD 103 On Lebanon of September 10, 1983"; Reagan, *Diaries.*

142 Kiron K. Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson, eds., Reagan, *In His Own Hand: The Writings of Ronald Reagan that Reveal His Revolutionary Vision for America* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), 481.

Staff Vessey, who interpreted the bloodshed as evidence of the mission's futility. Yet, their attempts to disengage the United States from Lebanon were blocked by the intervention's erstwhile advocates, in particular Secretary of State Shultz and National Security Adviser McFarlane, who saw the violence as further evidence of the importance of the Marine presence. Confronted with a divided Cabinet, Reagan chose to maintain, harden, and even, at times, expand U.S. military involvement, decisions that were in line with his prior views about the efficacy and significance of the peacekeeping mission. In other words, the bombing caused two parties in the administration to double down on their pre-existing theories of success or failure in Lebanon.

The implications of this corrective should not be exaggerated. The Reagan administration's experience cannot prescribe future decisions, and it cannot alone disprove the role of domestic political pressure in other cases of U.S. intervention. Moreover, the limited character of the Lebanese intervention, which involved a relatively small number of U.S. forces, likely informed public and congressional attitudes toward government decision-making. Future research is needed to determine whether public opinion may play a greater role in influencing the timing and character of a decision to terminate missions that involve larger troop deployments or more sustained operations. Nonetheless, by highlighting the tendency of scholars to over-emphasize the effects of public opinion in this popular case study, this new history may also be relevant to other lines of inquiry in the literature on peacekeeping and war termination, the efficacy of limited interventions, and elite views of public opinion. For instance, the new evidence of policymakers' divergent reactions to the Beirut barracks bombing suggests a need to modify Bayesian learning models to better reflect the empirical record of individual and group decision-making. Our findings indicate that such modifications may be found in the literature on anchoring, motivated, and attribution biases.[143]

Bringing these strands of research together may yield a more comprehensive theory about how entrenched values, beliefs, and psychological traits inform elite learning and decision-making during military interventions.[144]

Additionally, the Lebanon example may inform policymakers' efforts to manage future crises by promoting systematic questions for probing the progress of an intervention and processing new information from the field. Such questions may be essential at a time when the increasing frequency of sub-state conflicts may spur additional U.S. force commitments.[145] In particular, this history demonstrates the importance of bringing assumptions about how and why a military intervention is likely to proceed to the fore; articulating clear theories of success; and developing processes to test, update, and revise these theories over time. Policymakers must define early on, and clearly, what success or failure looks like and identify demonstrable metrics that align with the ultimate political goals of an intervention. Conversely, leaders must also consider what information from the field, if it were to appear, would indicate that the political objectives cannot be met. Integrating these considerations into contingency and operational planning would, in turn, aid policymakers' ability to evaluate new information and help to structure analysis of an intervention's execution, especially if revisited frequently over the course of a military deployment.

The U.S. government does have tools for probing assumptions and evaluating change over time. But answering the questions above requires more than designating a red team or devil's advocate, tactics often implemented in government but ones that are frequently ineffective due to an air of defeatism, bureaucratic isolation, or *Peter and the Wolf*-like disregard.[146] To promote clearer thinking will require encouraging the next generation of foreign policy professionals to develop the analytical skills and historical sensibility to wield established tools more effectively.[147] As the United States confronts

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143 For a discussion of relevant psychological biases, see Jack Levy, "Psychology and Foreign Policy Decision-Making," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, ed. Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Rose McDermott, "The Psychological Ideas of Amos Tversky and Their Relevance for Political Science," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 13, no.1 (2001): 5–33, https://doi.org/10.1177/0951692801013001001; James M. Goldgeier and Philip E. Tetlock, "Psychology and International Relations Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4, no. 1 (2001): 67–92, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.67.

144 For an excellent example, see Yarhi-Milo, *Who Fights*, in particular chap. 7.

145 James D. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?" *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 275–301, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343304043770; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90, https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/publications/ethnicity_insurgency_and_civil_war.

146 For a history of the perils and promise of red teaming and other related practices, see Micah Zenko, *Red Team: How to Succeed by Thinking Like the Enemy* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

147 Francis J. Gavin, "Thinking Historically: A Guide for Strategy and Statecraft," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 17, 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/thinking-historically-a-guide-for-strategy-and-statecraft/.

the prospect of future intervention scenarios, there is an urgent need to rethink how to train the next generation of policymakers to better challenge assumptions during debates, to process information during crises, and to think systematically about policy consequences. A careful study of the U.S. experience withdrawing from Lebanon offers a modest step toward this ambitious goal.

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