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## 'Another Beirut,' Another Chance

By LINCOLN P. BLOOMFIELD JR.

NATO forces have finally been enlisted to enforce the no-fly zone over Bosnia. Much of the American reticence to date over the use of force has stemmed from the fear of "another Beirut." But both proponents and opponents of a greater U.S. military role in the Balkans who equate the 1982-1984 Lebanon intervention with unqualified disaster overlook a remarkable fact about that U.S.-led operation: It worked.

Of course no one could forget the infamous suicide bombing attack on the Marine barracks on October 23, 1983. But that is not the whole story. Beyond the dreadful headlines and the partisan rhetoric that accompanied the reporting from that period was a successful military deployment that restored and kept a fragile peace for the better part of a year. The Multinational Force in Lebanon was so successful that U.S. officials became complacent about the need for decisive diplomatic action. The result was a quagmire and ultimately, tragedy.

In June 1982, Israeli forces surrounded Beirut in a quest to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization's base there. For several weeks beginning in July, the city's fuel, water and food supplies were cut off, as Israeli jets and artillery bombarded Yasser Arafat's many hideouts in West Beirut. Hospitals ran short of blood and sanitary supplies, and the city faced outbreaks of infectious disease. Like Bosnia, it was a humanitarian crisis; like Bosnia, Lebanon had religious and ethnic hostility that threatened American interests throughout the region.

So President Reagan sent in the Marines—not alone, but alongside French and Italian contingents. Their mission was not to engage in combat, but to support a diplomatic agreement brokered by the late Philip Habib, according to which PLO fighters would leave the country and Israel would keep its troops out of Beirut.

The PLO left by sea within a few days, and on August 23 the Lebanese elected a new President, Bashir Gemayel. After patrolling the area for a couple of uneventful weeks, U.S. troops also departed—well within the 30 days estimated by the White House. President Reagan was so encouraged by the mission's success that he put forth his full-blown Middle East peace plan on September 1.

Lebanon, of course, was still plagued

with political demons. On September 14, nine days before he was to take office, Mr. Gemayel was assassinated in a massive bomb attack. Over the next 72 hours, Israeli troops moved north into the city and families of the departed PLO fighters were massacred by Christian militiamen in the Sabra and Shatila camps of southern Beirut.

When President Reagan sent the Marines back in at the end of September to help calm a traumatized country, few questions were raised at home about the humanitarian and moral basis for doing so. The French and Italians unhesitatingly rejoined the effort.

This second deployment—with its more nebulous mission—is well-remembered for what went wrong, as U.S. forces be-

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came entangled in factional strife. But such renditions overlook the fact that for nine months (fall 1982 to spring 1983), American, French, Italian and later British soldiers openly patrolled the streets. Children went back to school; shopkeepers replaced their broken windows and opened for business; and diplomacy had a chance to work.

Sadly, American policy makers failed to grasp how perishable was this window of opportunity. Mr. Habib stepped down from his role, and U.S. leaders then delegated rather than led the negotiations—hence failing to impart a sense of urgency or maintain a position of strength. The process dragged on. Inevitably, the crowds began circling in Beirut, probing Western intentions and resolve. On April 18, 1983, the U.S. Embassy was destroyed by a suicide bomber.

By the time Secretary of State George Shultz stepped in on May 17 to broker a formula for Israeli and Syrian disengagement from the Lebanese civil conflict, it was too late. Neither Israel nor Syria felt compelled to compromise any longer. Mr. Shultz's stillborn agreement extinguished, instead of energized, the dialogue for peace. Too stubborn to re-open the talks and too proud to disengage from a mission that no longer made sense, the U.S. allowed its forces to become sitting ducks.

Will Bosnia become "another Beirut?" If we misread Beirut's lessons, it could.

First, American leadership is a calling, not an option. Although, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the multinational colors fly much more prominently than they did in Beirut, Washington cannot escape the consequences of the United Nations', European Community's, and NATO's exertions. The multilateral force's success or failure will be ours as well. If relieving America of the role of world policeman is a key feature of the New World Order, nothing would be worse in this regard than a U.N. retreat under fire in Bosnia.

Lebanon taught that military forces can be effective either as benign peacekeepers or partisan combatants, but not both. As Serbian guns provoke stiffer international counter-measures, U.N. forces may already be losing their legitimacy to the Serbs as neutral monitors. Before the lightly defended U.N. forces suffer a tragedy, efforts to defuse the crisis must be escalated.

Lebanon also taught us, however, that "escalation" need not mean turning up the firepower. In Bosnia as in Beirut, diplomacy is the key. President Clinton should consider proposing an emergency gathering of all involved parties, including Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic and his patron Boris Yeltsin.

Only then can we learn whether there is any aspiration more meaningful to the Serbs than the grisly land-grab in which they are now engaged. If it becomes clear that nothing short of force can rescue the Muslims of Bosnia, the U.S. military will still have another lesson in store: given a clear and credible mission, it will very likely succeed.

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