Grenada and Beirut

The invasion of Grenada was illegal, of course. It was also a kind of media event, staged to make the president seem strong in the eyes of the voters and to take some of the sting out of the calamity of Beirut. Yet even those who do not admire the administration’s coup de main can make sense out of it. Mr. Reagan seized the pretext provided by Grenada’s internal turmoil to uproot what he hoped to be a Soviet and Cuban outpost once and for all. His intervention, moreover, will have serious diplomatic costs, whatever its benefits. Mrs. Thatcher, for example, was not amused. Nevertheless, the Americans who died or were wounded in Grenada made their sacrifice in pursuit of a recognizable goal, and one that most Americans are probably inclined to approve.

The case is different in Lebanon. American lives are being lost in a way that seems quite pointless. Otto von Bismarck once remarked that Germany had no interest in the Near East that was worth “the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier.” Mr. Reagan has spent hundreds of American lives defending the Beirut airport. Of course, the United States does have vital interests in the Middle East and important concerns in Lebanon, and the president is correct in maintaining that things would be worse if the Marines withdrew. To argue that another policy would be more foolish, however, is not enough to prove that Mr. Reagan’s own policy is wise or even sane. And the public knows it.

In Lebanon, Mr. Reagan does not really have a policy. Instead, the U.S. has followed a set of rather misty hopes with a series of desperate improvisations. From the beginning our aim has been to stabilize Lebanon without alienating moderate Arab regimes or damaging the position of friendly states like Saudi Arabia. A humiliating Israeli victory, consequently, was out of the question. So far, so good. The Reagan administration persuaded itself, however, that if the PLO could be evacuated from West Beirut, it would (1) be relatively easy to persuade other foreign forces: to withdraw and (2) that once these forces were out of Lebanon, the Lebanese Government would be able to reassert its sovereignty. Both of these assumptions proved to be inane. Lebanese communal factions, embittered by years of blood, treachery, and terror, were not ready for any civil kiss of peace. The Lebanese Army was never strong enough to disarm the various militias throughout the country. Neither Israel nor Syria was willing to withdraw without the guarantee that Lebanon would be controlled by friendly forces. In short, the very limited success of Mr. Gemayel’s government led to increased Syrian intervention. As the shock of Israel’s military victory has faded, moreover, Syria and the Palestinians—doubtless reinforced by the USSR—have grown more assertive rather than less.

When the administration was forced to send the Marines back to Beirut, after having extracted them with much self-congratulation, it implicitly acknowledged the collapse of its original design. Our subsequent course has proved just as fragile. First, we have committed ourselves to leaving American forces in Lebanon to support the Lebanese Government. Second, we will not commit enough forces to enable the Lebanese Government to succeed militarily. Third, we hope that diplomacy—principally that of Saudi Arabia—will contrive some sort of peace between factions who have been persuaded by our military presence that no one of them can hope to win. This hypothetical peace, restoring something like the old Lebanese balance, will enable the administration fondly hopes—enable Syria (and Israel) to withdraw without indignity.

It is a pleasant notion, but its practicability is doubtful. In the first place, the animosity between Lebanese factions is so great that they will not even conceal their arms, much less give them up, except in the face of force majeure. Moreover, the Syrian Government is based on an ethnic minority that holds power only precariously; it cannot allow itself to appear weak, and it can make concessions only if opposed by what is visibly overwhelming power. Soviet assistance, by strengthening Syria, requires that any such humbling force be even more towering.

Any hope for a diplomatic solution, in other words, requires the military strength necessary to compel and allow all parties to accept it. Clearly, the administration hoped that the multinational contingents in Beirut would provide the necessary “show of force.” In that symbolism to which Mr. Reagan is so inclined, the presence of troops from great industrial powers, even in token numbers, should be enough to show Syria and the rebellious factions in Lebanon that they cannot win. That notion, however, presumes that the American Marines in Beirut are more than a token or a symbol and that the United States is prepared to use its awesome power, should it be necessary. Our adversaries, on the other hand, suspect that our “show of force” is simply a show, that Mr. Reagan is all bark and no bite. The terrorist attack in Beirut was intended to prove that one could bait the lion and suffer no serious retaliation, and Mr. Reagan confirmed that prediction. If we commit more forces, the president remarked, “we would be the combat force”—a curious comment, since we already seem to be engaged in something like combat. Mr. Reagan’s meaning was clear when he went on to say that larger American forces would “increase the number of targets” and risk “overall conflict and world war.” Mr. Reagan is saying that we are committed to support the government of Lebanon militarily only so long as casualties remain reasonably low and the chance of a serious war is minute. That kind of statement is an invitation to escalation, and it amounts to a confession of weakness that all but forecloses a diplomatic solution.

If nothing else, Mr. Reagan should have shame enough to honor our pledge scaled with so many young American lives. Petty victories like Grenada are no compensation, nor does it sufficiently honor the fallen to revenge ourselves on their assassins.