

UNDER COVER

Lebanon and Common Sense

Lebanon dishonors us. The failure of American policy reflects the combination of arrogance, ignorance, and moral weakness that so often characterizes this administration, but the fault does not stop there. Americans as a people are complicit; we are shamed not only because our leaders blundered, but because Lebanon points to flaws in our political life.

The American withdrawal was a bleak defeat. The United States abandoned the field to its enemies, giving them that ancient and decisive proof of victory. In 1980, Mr. Reagan and his friends fulminated because President Carter had not intervened to save Formosa or the shah. In 1984, the Reagan administration deserted Lebanon in its desperate hour. The Gemayel regime, moreover, was guilty of very little except attempting to pacify Lebanon and to uphold its agreement with Israel. Mr. Gemayel's political judgment has been defective—in part because he trusted the United States—but it is hard to fault his intentions. The Gemayel government is weak, not indecent; its faults give no pretext for betrayal. It makes matters worse that by frittering away the opportunity created by the shock of Israel's blitzkrieg, the Reagan administration may have cost Lebanon its last chance for political unity.

Upwards of three hundred Americans have died in Lebanon, and the best that can be said of Mr. Reagan's venture is that they died in vain. Falsely optimistic, the administration sent to Lebanon a force too small to establish or keep the peace. When that error became clear, Mr. Reagan—fearful of the cost to his popularity—was unwilling to withdraw the Marines or to reinforce them adequately. As our antagonists realized, Mr. Reagan's strength is a poseur's bluster. Unfortunately, in politics there are no stuntmen to step in when the danger is real. No terrible retaliation followed the attack on the Marine base in Beirut, and now the Marines are gone altogether. Our enemies have reason to think that the United States will cave in when resolutely opposed, even if it leaves its dead unavenged.

The president's speech does us even more dishonor than his policy. Mr. Reagan could have made a straightforward defense of the withdrawal, contending that this retreat was forced on him by the unwillingness of Congress to support his policy. Such a speech would have followed the president's habit of blaming his problems on others; and more important, that sort of explanation would have made sense even to those of us who would have disagreed with it.

Instead, the president chose to deny that he had suffered a defeat, referring to a "redeployment" and a "reconcentrating" of our forces. William Safire treated the president's euphemisms with good-humored amusement, arguing that there is nothing new in Mr. Reagan's search for "nondiscouraging words" to describe retreat. But the problem is more serious than that.

Common sense is the ultimate safeguard of common speech. The public's sensibility sets a limit on what a leader can safely say. It establishes what is seemly and what is

shameful and lays the foundation of quality in political life. There is less and less comfort in that proposition. If Mr. Truman had called the retreat from the Yalu a "redeployment," he would have been hooted out of office; he had enough problems with his more defensible reference to Korea as a "police action." Even Safire's bitter description of Lebanon as Reagan's "Bay of Pigs" ignores the fact that Kennedy acknowledged and took responsibility for that catastrophe. It did not cross Mr. Kennedy's mind that he might refer to the Bay of Pigs as "an unsuccessful reconnaissance in force." But while Mr. Reagan undoubtedly expected some derision, he calculated that he would seem less foolish to the general public if he spoke of redeployment than if he admitted defeat. He anticipated a howl or two, but he assumed that Americans would not treat his explanation as *ridiculous*.

Something is going wrong with our sense of what is politically absurd. Americans, like most people, would like honor bought cheaply. The great majority of Americans were relieved to have the Marines safely out of Beirut, but at the same time most of us recognized that there were real values at stake in Lebanon; and millions of Americans, especially among those who support the president, were unwilling to suffer yet another humiliation. There is nothing new in this ambivalence, nor is it unusual that there are political leaders who tell us that we *can* have it both ways.

Increasingly, however, Americans seem willing to accept such comforting lies. Mr. Nixon and Mr. Kissinger, after all, got away with the claim that they had brought us peace with honor in Vietnam. Our common sense no longer appears able to protect us. Common sense derives from community, and our fragmented society is less and less able to provide it. Americans have a growing dependence on television, a medium that encourages the vision of an orderless reality in which anything is possible. And since the world is so overwhelming, and our own efforts seem so feeble, it is not surprising that Americans are tempted by smiling illusions. Many Americans who know that Mr. Reagan is all facade may still argue that a facade is better than facelessness, just as hollow comfort is more pleasant than no comfort at all.

Vulnerability helps to explain the willingness to be deceived, but not its folly. Political reality is often bitter, but it is a better prescription than nonsense, especially since the recognition of individual weakness urges us toward community, and the confrontation with guilt permits us to atone. Great Nineveh, too, "stood tall," comforting itself with its wealth and weaponry, seeking to forget the inner emptiness of its political life.

Your princes are like grasshoppers, your scribes like clouds of locusts, sitting on the fences in a day of cold. When the sun rises, they fly away. No one knows where they are. Your shepherds are asleep, O King of Assyria, your nobles slumber. Your people are scattered on the mountains, with none to gather them [Nahum 3:17-18].

Our case appears to be the same. If we do not find a shepherd in 1984, we may find that our hurt, like Nineveh's, is past assuaging.

Wilson Carey McWilliams