

Lebanon

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PRESIDENT REAGAN'S PRESS CONFERENCE, 20 DECEMBER : MIDDLE EAST.

1. AFTER A BRIEF OPENING STATEMENT ON THE ECONOMY PRESIDENT REAGAN WAS CLOSELY QUESTIONED ABOUT HIS MIDDLE EAST POLICY.
2. HE SAID THAT STRATEGIC COOPERATION WITH ISRAEL WOULD NOT JEOPARDISE THE U S ROLE AS PEACEKEEPER. IT WAS NOTHING MORE THAN A REAFFIRMATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP DATING FROM 1948. HE EMPHASISED TO SHAMIR THAT HE WOULD GO FORWARD WITH RELATIONS WITH THE MODERATE ARABS IN ORDER TO ACT AS A CATALYST IN BRINGING PEACE TO THE MIDDLE EAST.
3. THE MIDDLE EAST WAS A TINDERBOX, OF IMPORTANCE TO THE FREE WORLD, WHERE AN UNWANTED WAR COULD START. THE U S WAS DETERMINED TO TRY TO BRING ABOUT PEACE. PROGRESS HAD BEEN MADE WITH THE MODERATE ARABS: SOME HAD ABANDONED THEIR REFUSAL TO LET ISRAEL EXIST. SADAT - GOD REST HIS SOUL - HAD BROKEN THE MOULD. THE GOAL WAS NOW TO FIND MORE LEADERS AND GOVERNMENTS TO QUOTE BECOME EGYPTS UNQUOTE.
4. ASKED ABOUT THE EFFECT OF MARINES DYING IN LEBANON ON U S PUBLIC OPINION, THE PRESIDENT SAID HE UNDERSTOOD PUBLIC CONCERN WHICH HAD BEEN SWAYED BY ATTACKS, SOME POLITICALLY - MOTIVATED, ON THE MARINES PRESENCE. HE LAUNCHED INTO A SOMEWHAT DISJOINTED AND SELECTIVE ACCOUNT OF RECENT HISTORY.

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5. THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT HAD COME UNGLUED SEVERAL YEARS AGO.
MORE THAN 1 MILLION PALESTINIAN REFUGEES WHO HAD BEEN IN
LEBANON FOR DECADES HAD SET UP THEIR OWN MILITIA - THE PLO
MILITARY AND TERRORIST GROUP - WHO HAD NOT ONLY CAUSED TROUBLE
IN LEBANON BUT HAD CROSSED INTO NORTHERN ISRAEL AND PREYED ON
CIVILIANS THERE. FINALLY THE ISRAELIS HAD CROSSED INTO LEBANON.
THEIR FIRST GOAL HAD BEEN TO PUSH THE PLO BACK 25 MILES. BUT THEY
HAD KEPT ATTACKING, SO THE ISRAELIS HAD PUSHED FORWARD TO THE EDGE
OF BEIRUT WHERE THOUSANDS HAD DIED IN THE FIGHTING. DURING ALL
THIS THE LEBANESE HAD ASKED THE SYRIANS TO COME IN TO HELP PRESERVE
ORDER AMONG THE RELIGIOUS AND OTHER RIVAL FACTIONS.

6. ONCE A LEBANESE GOVERNMENT HAD BEEN FORMED AND THE PLO HAD BEEN
REJECTED THE MNF HAD GONE IN. THE ISRAELIS, HAVING COMPLETED THEIR
MISSION, HAD ANNOUNCED THEIR WILLINGNESS AND INTENTION TO WITHDRAW,
AS HAD THE SYRIANS. BUT THE SYRIANS HAD QUOTE FOR SOME REASON UNQUOTE
RENEGED ON THEIR PROMISE DESPITE A FORMAL LEBANESE REQUEST THAT THEY
SHOULD LEAVE. THE MNF'S MISSION WAS UNCHANGED. THEY HAD
HELPED TO ARM AND TRAIN THE LAF WHICH WAS NOW A CAPABLE FORCE.
WHEN OTHER FOREIGN FORCES WITHDREW AND THE LAF ADVANCED TO ESTABLISH
ORDER THE MNF WAS SUPPOSED TO GO BEHIND THEM TO TRY TO HELP ACHIEVE
STABILITY AND ORDER. THE ISRAELIS HAD AGREED TO WITHDRAW: SYRIA
WAS THE STUMBLING-BLOCK. GEMAYEL WAS MEANWHILE TRYING TO BRING IN
OTHER LEBANESE FORCES TO BROADEN THE BASE OF HIS GOVERNMENT.

7. IN REPLY TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SAFETY OF THE MARINES REAGAN SAID
THAT HE WAS NOT PURSUING A POLICY OF ESCALATION BUT THAT U S FORCES
WOULD SHOOT BACK IF ATTACKED. THIS HAD GIVEN PAUSE FOR THOUGHT
TO THOSE WHO HAD CONSIDERED THE MNF FAIR GAME. THEY WOULD TRY MORE
TERRORIST ACTIVITIES BUT TERRORISM COULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO WIN.
FIELD COMMANDERS WERE DOING ALL THEY COULD TO ENSURE THE
MARINES' SAFETY. THE REPORTS OF THE PENTAGON INVESTIGATION AND
A HOUSE ARMED SERVICES SUB-COMMITTEE ON THE ATTACK ON THE MARINES
HQ WOULD BE CONSIDERED BY WEINBERGER IN THE NEXT FEW DAYS. THE
PRESIDENT SAID THAT HE STILL HAD FULL CONFIDENCE IN THE MARINE
COMMANDANT: THE HQ BUILDING HAD BEEN THE SAFEST PLACE FOR THE
MARINES GIVEN THE WEAPONS WHICH HAD BEEN USED AGAINST THEM PRIOR
TO 23 OCTOBER.

8. ASKED ABOUT LT GOODMAN, REAGAN SAID THAT HE WAS NOT A PRISONER
OF WAR AS THE SYRIANS CLAIMED SINCE NO WAR HAD BEEN DECLARED. HE
DID NOT THINK THE SYRIANS WOULD USE HIM AS A HOSTAGE OR
BARGAINING CHIP. THE U S WAS DOING ALL IT COULD TO SECURE HIS
RELEASE: THIS HAD BEEN HIGH ON THE AGENDA OF RUMSFELD'S TALKS IN
DAMASCUS.

9. REAGAN CONCLUDED BY STATING THAT THE MARINES WOULD BE BROUGHT
HOME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER ACCOMPLISHING THEIR MISSION.
HE REPEATED THAT HE WOULD TAKE NO DECISION INVOLVING THE LIVES
OR SAFETY OF U S SERVICEMEN FOR POLITICAL OR ELECTORAL REASONS.

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