

## The combat-readiness of the Reagan administration

by Richard Cohen in Washington, D.C.

If the Soviet Union or anyone else is taking current U.S. actions in Lebanon as a measure of what the White House response will be to escalating Soviet military provocations, it is making a dangerous miscalculation. Our evidence, corroborated by sources close to the U.S. administration, indicates that a subtle but dramatic shift has developed in foreign policy decision making since the period leading up to President Reagan's decision to undertake the Grenada rescue action.

The miscalculation is not just on Moscow's side, however. The State Department has issued equally misleading "signals," particularly after the events of Dec. 4-5 when Syrian forces, acting as proxies for Moscow, launched an unprovoked attack on the U.S. peacekeeping forces.

On Dec. 4, United States fighter aircraft based on the large naval fleet hovering off Lebanon in the eastern Mediterranean struck against Syrian anti-aircraft batteries which only one day before had fired on two unarmed U.S. reconnaissance planes. On Dec. 5, Lebanese factions operating from within Syrian-controlled territory began heavy firing against U.S. Marine positions around Beirut Airport. The Syria-supported attack was unlike any previous shelling against American force positions in the airport vicinity. It left no doubt that the Marines were the direct target, and eight were killed.

The Syrian-backed barrage was only silenced with heavy

bombardment from U.S. guns on the Mediterranean task force.

Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Lawrence Eagleburger, who had been a central figure in midwifing the U.S.-Israeli strategic agreement announced in Washington on Nov. 29, appeared on national television Dec. 4 to emphasize that the U.S. retaliatory strike should be read as a clear signal in Damascus. The next day George Shultz, responding at a Washington press conference, explained the intended message. "If you see someone who will defend himself and who can defend himself, you would better be a little careful how you handle it." Shultz went on to extend the signal from Damascus to Moscow, charging that the Soviet Union is "a presence connected with Syrian aggression."

Blustering overconfidence that Moscow will "get the message," as exemplified by two of the top figures in the State Department, has spread since mid-November throughout the State Department bureaucracy while gathering influence within segments of the Central Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon, and the National Security Council. This has led to a broad misperception within leading ranks of the Reagan administration that the Soviet leadership will be scared off its provocative course of ignoring the determination to resist shown in the U.S. demonstrations of force initiated with the Grenada military operation and building up to the latest,



*U.S. Marines observing the fighting in Beirut from their defensive position.*

badly needed and long-delayed, U.S. retaliatory action in Lebanon.

It is on this basis that many leading national security counsellors of the President foolishly believe that the escalating series of Soviet provocations beginning with the Sept. 1 downing of KAL Flight 007 will remain in the range of what administration spokesmen identify as "low-order probes" and will not escalate into a serious challenge to U.S. vital interests in the Middle East, Western Europe, or Korea. This chatter, heavily encouraged by the White House politicians around Chief of Staff James Baker III, itself dangerously encourages serious Soviet miscalculation.

### **The President prepares to make command decisions**

More and more, President Ronald Reagan, acting on his own beliefs, is determining and directing U.S. foreign policy. It would therefore be a misreading in Moscow if the overconfident, soft-minded mutterings of Shultz and many others in the administration were to be taken as an indication of the combat-readiness of the President and his more trusted advisers under conditions of a threat to U.S. vital interests.

Moscow would be well-advised to read important statements made by leading administration officials *since* a telling National Security Council meeting on Nov. 30 dealing with ballistic-missile defense. These statements should be consid-

ered urgent reading by Soviet leaders, especially since they differ markedly from signals being sent from the State Department and others convinced that the United States' relatively meager show of force up to this point has frightened the Kremlin into sobriety.

One day after Marshal Ogarkov's shattering rebuttal to those in the administration who had been predicting that business-as-usual in U.S.-Soviet relations was just around the corner, United Nations Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, known to frequently express the personal views of the President, gave a speech at the annual meeting of the American Enterprise Institute in Washington. There she warned that "the vast majority of Americans will fight rather than accept Soviet domination. . . . These are especially dangerous times." She went on to identify the nature of the immediate crisis, reporting that the world is rife with regional conflicts marked by "unparalleled Soviet aggression from an unprecedented position of strength."

Kirkpatrick then attacked the liberal media as representing the institutional opposition to bipartisanship in foreign policy, taking a whack at the Kissinger-Carrington dominated Eastern Establishment foreign policy elite, all of whom have parroted the State Department line on U.S.-U.S.S.R. relations in the past several weeks: "They are more interested in being elected to the board of the New York Council on Foreign Relations than the presidency." She warned that we must face this crisis and its Soviet factor, for we would ignore it at our own peril.

On the same day and on the same platform, U.S. chief negotiator at the intermediate-range nuclear force (INF) talks in Geneva, Paul Nitze, went further in identifying current Soviet motives. He acknowledged the Soviets have negotiated seriously throughout the INF talks, but stated, "That is not the problem. The problem is their purpose, and their purpose in these negotiations is to split the Alliance."

The Nitze-Kirkpatrick evaluation represents the harshest assessment of real Soviet motivations yet promoted publicly by any Reagan administration official. Further, Kirkpatrick's statement represents a clear warning to the Soviet leadership, which has based its willingness to engage in high-risk provocation in part on the belief that the U.S. population, still dazed by Vietnam and Watergate, will not fight if U.S. vital interests are jeopardized, and that the U.S. political leadership—often mistaken by Moscow to be the liberal Eastern Establishment crowd—will not, particularly in a national election year, lead a resistant American population to fight.

### **The beam-defense question up front**

On Dec. 1, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger left for a trip to France and Brussels with the priority purpose of informing the NATO allies on pending presidential decisions with respect to ballistic missile defense, which had been the central topic at the Nov. 30 NSC meeting. On Dec. 2, Weinberger, speaking before the Atlantic Institute in Paris, warned that "the Soviets are ahead of the U.S. in the development of

anti-missile defense systems.” He added that the possibility the Soviets might be the first to develop an effective defense against nuclear attack was one of the most frightening prospects he could imagine.

Reportedly, a substantial portion of the Nov. 30 NSC meeting dwelled on the existing Soviet ballistic missile defense program.

Weinberger warned that the newly deployed U.S. cruise missiles in Europe are subject to “an increasingly successful defense.” He then added that the U.S. decision to accelerate development of its own defensive directed-energy beam weapons followed years of Soviet activity in the field. Finally, Weinberger implied that the United States’ ballistic-missile defense program would be applicable to Europe and Japan as well.

One day after the NSC meeting, in which an apparent general decision was made to go full-steam ahead with the program, research scientist Dr. Lowell Wood of Lawrence Livermore Laboratory identified at a Washington, D.C. seminar at the National Press Club the existing depth of Soviet advantage in defensive weapon systems capability. Wood revealed that according to photographic evidence, the Soviets are at least two years ahead of this country (see page 57).

Indeed, sources at a number of government agencies closely involved with preparations for the U.S. program uniformly indicated that, before his January State of the Union address, President Reagan will publicly identify what they call “a very large program” in this area.

White House sources reported in early December that the President will shortly unveil a comprehensive public report of Soviet arms control violations of both the SALT I and SALT II treaties. Demonstrating unwillingness to be held hostage to the fraud of arms-control negotiations, Reagan has overruled long-term State Department objections in deciding to release this information.

### **Misleading signals about Lebanon policy**

But presidential toleration and even echoing of the absurd forecast that Moscow will back off from escalating confrontation after only a few slaps on the wrist, and the administration’s simultaneous failure—up to this point—to take the reality of the crisis as painted in Kirkpatrick’s speech to the American population, can only raise questions in Moscow and elsewhere. The questions will be on whether the President and his leading advisers really believe the U.N. ambassador’s contention that Americans will fight, rather than submit to Soviet domination.

The White House and intelligence community contend that what is considered in Reagan administration circles a minor display of U.S. force in the case of Grenada resulted in “surprising reactions of fear and caution” among Soviet leaders, and that the second U.S. use of force in Lebanon may have delivered an additional jolt. Contrary to that view, the Soviets’ systematic evaluation of U.S. demonstrations of force up to this point does not discourage their willingness to

take risks.

A case in point is the curious context in which the United States chose to respond to Syrian provocation.

On Nov. 29, after two days of meetings between Reagan, his national security advisers, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Arens, a relatively undefined U.S.-Israeli “strategic alliance” was announced. Dismissing the protests of Washington and Tel Aviv that only political and diplomatic joint actions would be coordinated, most Washington observers believe that Eagleburger and Shultz, the principal promoters of the plan originally proposed by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, intend to generate the perception that the Israeli army would now be affixed to the U.S. naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean.

In the Kissingerian interpretation of the accord, Israel and the Lebanese army would play the part of U.S. proxies in a showdown with Syria, relieving the U.S. military of the obligation to carry out more than a token “peacekeeping” role in the defense of Lebanese sovereignty to which President Reagan is committed.

The U.S.-Israeli strategic alliance was followed up on Nov. 30 and Dec. 1, when Lebanese President Amin Gemayel found no support in Washington for his desire to wriggle out of the May accord between Lebanon and Israel providing for withdrawal of Israel forces from Lebanon on the condition that Syria also withdrew. Gemayel’s desire was enforced through heavy blackmail by Syria and Soviet surrogates in Lebanon, as well as encouraged by frightened moderate Arab states led by Saudi Arabia. But after his Washington meetings, Gemayel was forced to snub his blackmailers while at the same time affixing his marginal Lebanese national armed force capability as an asset within the U.S.-Israeli strategic accord.

It is in this context that the U.S. retaliated against Syria, even though the conditions for the retaliation—specifically, anti-aircraft fire at U.S. unarmed reconnaissance planes and even worse, the Beirut massacre of Oct. 24—had existed long before the Washington week of diplomacy.

Under these circumstances, Eagleburger’s and Shultz’s “tough” message to Damascus and Moscow might wind up receiving an opposite reading. For Soviet planners are sure to believe that U.S. officials had assessed that a direct U.S. retaliation against Syria may lead to the escalation of conflict in Lebanon. Therefore the question is raised: Whose troops will fight? Will Americans fight? Will the President ask Americans to fight in an election year?

The strategic alliance with Israel may provide the Soviet leadership with what they think is an answer to those questions. That answer has little to do with what President Reagan intends to do, and provides grounds for a great and dangerous Soviet miscalculation on the basic question of whether the American population will fight, whether the President would ask the country to fight, and how our European allies would react in such a crisis.