

The Lebanon War of 1982. Text of a podcast on Stocktonafterclass, August, 2022

This is Ron Stockton

I want to tell you about the Lebanon War of 1982. It was a catastrophic war, a war that should never have happened. It left behind a region transformed – not in a good way. It happened because there were militant leaders in Israel – and a few in Lebanon – who had delusions about how they could restructure the region to their liking. The war lasted 18 years, and in a sense has not stopped.

As I see it, the best way to make sense of this war is to think of the key players. How did they see this war and what did they hope to achieve? Those players would be Ariel Sharon, the Israeli Defense Minister, Bachir Gemayel, the head of the Lebanese Forces militia, Hafez al Assad, the President of Syria, President Ronald Reagan, Yasser Arafat, head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shia militia.

But before we start, may I suggest that you download a relief map of Lebanon, one that shows mountains and rivers. Geography is important to this war, and a map will help.

I want to mention something that we Americans misunderstand. Lebanon is what is sometimes called a confessional country. That means there is a host of religious groups, each with their own organizations and even political structures. There are Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Maronite Catholics, and Orthodox Christians, and Armenians, and the Druze. Most of these at one time or the other had their own militia, outside the control of the government. Sometimes a group would be factionalized and would have more than one militia. If sovereignty implies a legitimate monopoly on power – a standard political science definition – then Lebanon did not have that. There were multiple centers of power, many being supported by outside allies. When we read about Christians massacring Muslims or Muslims massacring Christians we need to pause. These are not the actions of people acting on faith. When a religious community organizes parties and militias and enters the political system, it should no longer be seen as a religious group. It has become a religio-ethnic group. Lebanese progressives have fought this system for decades, but it holds tightly to its power.



The Israelis call this war Operation Peace for Galilee. Galilee is the northern province of Israel. It borders on Lebanon. There's not a single person in all of Lebanon who thinks this war had anything to do with peace. I will just call it the Lebanese War. It lasted until 2000 but we will talk about that later.

To start, let's look at some context. You always have to know the situation before a war to see what the goal was. If a war doesn't produce some good for someone, it's a wasted war. And if all that it produces is 144,000 dead bodies, which is the number of Lebanese people who died from 1975 to 2000, that's pretty much a waste. And 654 Israelis also died.

Let's move back a bit. Nasser's last act before he died in 1970 was to create an agreement whereby Palestinian military forces in Jordan could be moved into Lebanon. There were already Palestinian refugees from 1948 in Lebanon. They were about 10 percent of the population and they lived in refugee camps. Many of those refugee camps were around Beirut. Two famous ones were Sabra and Shatila. There were also camps in the south. That area is mostly Shia Muslim, but not entirely. There are also Christians down there.

In 1970 when they moved those military forces out of Jordan into Lebanon they went into those camps. So suddenly, from an Israeli point of view, those camps became threatening. Also from the point of view of the people in southern Lebanon, those camps became threatening. Why? For the same reason -- they had Palestinian soldiers. Every Lebanese will say to you, "we have exceptional sympathy for the Palestinians." But when they're in your town setting up roadblocks and getting fresh with the girls, maybe there's a different perspective. So this began creating tension. And once the Palestinian military forces came in, every Lebanese group began to say, ok, the PLO has an army, we better have an army. So they began to build up militias. This was a very bad sign.

The nature of this build-up changed from fear to reality in 1975 when a clash occurred. Some armed Palestinians attacked some Maronites as they were leaving a church service. Four people were killed. Can you guess what happened next? The Maronites, whose party was called the Phalange and whose militia was called The Lebanese Forces, decided to seek revenge. Under the leadership of their militant leader Bashir Gemayel they attacked a Palestinian bus and killed 27 people.

And we were off to the races. Suddenly everybody was wanting revenge. I don't want to list these massacres but in January, 1976, after some Palestinians had been killed, Palestinian units moved against the beautiful Christian town of Damour. This was more than just a massacre. 250 people were killed. Or was it 582? Who knows? Women were raped. Babies were shot in the head. Graveyards were dug up. And God sat weeping at what was happening to the most beautiful country in the Arab world.

Finally the Syrian army came in to stabilize the situation. They had been invited by the Arab League. But it also made sense that they would do so. If you're a Syrian leader, such as Hafez al Assad, you look back to the early 1920s when Syria and Lebanon were one country. It was not long ago that elegant ladies in Damascus would get on the train and spend a day in Beirut shopping. It was just a 40 mile ride. To Syrians, and to some Lebanese, they really were one country. But the French -- how treacherous they were -- split it into two countries so they could control each of them easier. But to the Syrians, Lebanon is an integral part of Syria. One people and two countries, that's the phrase they use today.

In 1982 when the Israeli army entered the Bekka Valley, which touches the Syrian border, it was no surprise that Syria sent their air force into combat against the Israelis. And it was no surprise that the Israelis, with their wonderful American jets, were able to handle that attack with some ease. But as an Israeli intelligence officer once told me about Syria, there are times when losing a war is better than having no war at all. And if one plan fails, there is always a backup plan, as we will soon see.

There is another pre-event that played an important role in what happened. In 1977 President Anwar al-Sadat of Egypt visited Jerusalem, shook hands with Menachem Begin and spoke to the Israeli Knesset. Who could have believed such a thing? But there is a context here. Back in 1973 when the October War occurred, Sadat and Assad had promised that neither would stop fighting until both were ready to sign an armistice. But Sadat stopped, without even warning Assad. That was seen as a betrayal of the Arab

cause. Assad later forgave him, but still, the stain was there. Then Sadat betrayed the Arabs once again. The Arab consensus was that they would sign a treaty with the Israelis when we all sign, but not one at a time. We know, they said, what the Israelis will do. They'll play us against each other. So when Sadat visited Jerusalem and then signed a treaty recognizing Israel – well, he got what he wanted. He got the Sinai Peninsula back, the Israelis completely withdrew. That's quite an achievement, I must say. He also got the promise of an American alliance. Moreover, he got a promise that the Israelis would negotiate in good faith with the Palestinians. That was Part II of the Camp David Accords. But Prime Minister Menachem Begin was very hard right. He got what he wanted: a treaty with Egypt, American soldiers in the Sinai to make sure there was no cheating, and massive American aid. But he had no intention of giving up the West Bank.

If you listened to the podcast on the 1956 Suez War you remember what Ben-Gurion had proposed in the lead up to that war: Israel will annex the West Bank. There's no distinctive national "people" there, just individuals. Iraq can annex Jordan. But the West Bank is really a part of *Eretz Israel*, the land of the Jewish people. And it's also a part of Israel as far as Begin was concerned, and his follower, Benjamin Netanyahu. So based on this logic Begin offered a peace plan. The Palestinians can govern themselves. They can have "autonomy." But what does that mean, autonomy? One of his critics said it means sewer autonomy. You can look after your garbage, your local taxes, your roads.

This was different from what had prevailed before. From 1967 when Israel captured the Palestinian territories, the Labour government of the day quickly set up municipal governments. The major cities had mayors and city councils. They collected taxes and ran their own affairs.

But when Begin came to power, they dissolved those city councils. Some of the mayors were locked up. To replace them, they created *village leagues*. And what is a village league? They recruited tough guys and gave them weapons. They told them to maintaining order. They gave them sweetheart deals, business contracts. All you have to do is accept the Israeli occupation and maintain order (i.e., stop anyone who might resist the Israeli occupation).

But guess what? The Palestinians were not willing to accept the village leagues. They still resisted the occupation and supported the PLO. And Yasser Arafat kept saying, this is our country and someday it will be free and the Israelis will have to go back to their own country.

Menachem Begin did not like this and his Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon did not like it. And Sharon had a grand design. We'll get to that in a minute, but first let's talk about what happened in 1978.

In 1978, Israel invaded Lebanon. They called it an incursion. That's a nice, polite word. They entered southern Lebanon up to the Litani River. This river is about 14 miles from the Israeli border.

It's an ethnically mixed area, mostly Shia, but there are also some Christians. The Israelis said they were concerned about security -- which was an issue -- but they also wanted the water from the Litani. They wanted to divert that water to the south to "make the desert bloom." I have seen the National Water Carrier heading south. It's a big pipeline. It looks as if you could drive a Volkswagen through it.

But how would they manage this? They created a security force called the Southern Lebanese Army (SLA) under the command of a friendly Christian leader, Major Saad Haddad. The Israelis supplied the SLA and gave training. I had two students who were trained by the Israelis. They were Lebanese

Christians trained in Israel. This is very complex. As they say in the spy agencies, nothing is what it seems.

So by 1982, Menachem Begin was in power and was ready for a big move. His really aggressive. Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon was ready to change history. People said that Sharon's approach to struggle was that if force doesn't work, then more force will. He was a very violent man. Menachem Begin once said, 'I expect any morning to wake up to see the prime minister's mansion surrounded by tanks with Ariel Sharon trying to take over.' Maybe that was an exaggeration, but it captures his style.

I just told you Sharon had a grand plan. What was that plan? On that day in 1982 when the Israeli army entered Lebanon they said they were just going to the Litani – 22 kilometers, 14 miles. We drove the Palestinian soldiers out in 1978 but now they're sneaking back in – which they were – so we're going to drive them out once again. That's what they said in public, but once they got to the Litani, they kept going.

I had a student at the time, he was a Palestinian. It was my class on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and about a month before the war started, he said to me, 'they're going to go all the way' I said, what do you mean? He said, the Israelis. They're going to go into Lebanon and they're going to take the whole country. I said, ok, ok, relax. Not even Menachem Begin is crazy enough to occupy an Arab capital. That would be an invitation to permanent warfare. He says, no, you're wrong. So I thought to myself, this guy's been drinking too much coffee. Or listening to the wrong news source. But you know what, he was absolutely right and I was absolutely wrong. It's like when I said in 2002, even George W. Bush would not be crazy enough to occupy Baghdad. Wow. Was I wrong.

But, wait. I haven't told you Sharon's grand plan. Here it is: We are going to invade Lebanon all the way up to Beirut. He wasn't going to take the whole country because Bachir Gemayel, his ally, controlled northern Lebanon. North of Beirut is where the big Christian communities are, and Gemayel and his militia, the Lebanese Forces, control the north.

Once we succeed militarily, we will destroy the PLO, kill Yasser Arafat, and install a friendly government led by Bachir Gemayel. Then the Palestinians in the occupied territories will work out a deal with us. The only reason they are resisting now is that the PLO keeps promising to liberate them. The Palestinian people are peaceful. They want to live with us, but the PLO keeps intimidating them. That will change and there will be peace, just as Begin promised in the Camp David Accords.

These arguments sounded so familiar to me. In the 1960s, all of those Black demonstrators in the south wanting to vote, wanting the end of segregation, wanting to be respected. I can remember those southern politicians saying, 'we get along well with our dark people. We don't have any problem at all and they don't have any problem. We both live in our own areas and that's fine. It's those outsider agitators coming down from the north and stirring them up.'

That's what they said, and that's what Ariel Sharon said.

Now let's look at Bachir Gemayel. What did he want? We know what Ariel Sharon wanted and we know what the PLO wanted. They wanted the Israelis to get out of the West Bank and Gaza and East Jerusalem and let them have their own space. But what did Bachir Gemayel want? Interestingly, Bashir was an American citizen. He was also a CIA asset –that's the word, asset. He had an American Jewish mistress. I

read her memoir. She said if he hadn't been killed, he was going to leave his wife and marry me. Oh dream on sweetheart, that wasn't going to happen.

But we know what Bachir Gemayel wanted because he went to Washington and met with Caspar Weinberger, Reagan's powerful Secretary of Defense, and explained it. Bashir said to Weinberger, I want you to set up permanent bases in Lebanon. There were nine foreign armies in Lebanon at one point and Bashir said American bases would intimidate the heck out of everybody. We will take care of all of them. The Palestinians, we'll take care of them, the Israelis, don't worry. Once you're here and we are aligned with you, they're not going to fight us. The Syrians, we can move them out. The Iranian and Iraqi proxies. They will be gone. And once we are safe and secure, we will sign a treaty with Israel. You'll get everything you want, a secure Middle East, foreign armies out of Lebanon, a secure Lebanon, an Israel with an Arab ally. And moreover, Lebanon is going to become your staunchest ally in the region. Anything you want, we're going to give it to you. Ooh, that sounds like a sweetheart deal, doesn't it?

Let me read to you what Caspar Weinberger said in his memoir.

"He made a strange proposal to me, the United States should consider and use Lebanon as its strategic outpost in the Middle East. Lebanon was not quite to be our 51st state but its relationship with us might not have been altogether dissimilar from that condition if Gemayel's plan had been approved. It would have assured him of a permanent, large American troop presence and would have been a major factor in denying both Syria and Israel their presumed right to wander across Lebanon's border at will."

I once had a student who was Lebanese, a hardline Arab nationalist. He hated Bachir Gemayel, although this was after Bashir was assassinated. I liked him. He was my top student, but he had strong views. After I discussed this and explained Gemayel's logic, he was shocked. He said, you're making him sound reasonable. I said, well he *was* reasonable. He was a Lebanese patriot. He wanted a Lebanon that would be free of foreign control, strong and secure. Lebanon was once called the Switzerland of the Middle East, for good reason. The banks were there. The best university in the region was there. It was a wonderful place. Everybody who had any money went to Beirut for their vacation. It was the most beautiful country in the region. And now what it is? It's torn with war, it's broken up. It has foreign armies in it. This is a disaster.

I don't think my student ever became a fan of Gemayel, but he suddenly saw something he had never seen before. And what are the Rules of Good Studenting? Until you can explain someone's position to their satisfaction you don't know enough to know enough to know if you agree or disagree. Once my student heard Gemayel's position explained in the way Gemayel would have explained it, his eyes were opened.

So why did this war become such a catastrophe for the Americans? Our Secretary of State was Alexander Haig. I've read Haig's memoir. Ronald Reagan fired him because of the Lebanon war. But at the very end of his memoir he wrote that I had negotiations going on. If I could have stayed in office for another month, I would have solved every problem in the Middle East. Oh, come on Alex. He was delusional. He was not connected to reality.

The story of why Haig got fired is funny, in a sad sort of way. Haig was such a prima donna. He would walk into the president's office about once a week and would say 'if I don't get what I want, I'm resigning.' Reagan would say, 'oh now, Al, Al, let's just relax here, we can work this out, no problem.' And Haig would do this over and over again, this threat to resign.

And as this war was turning bad, he walked into Reagan's office and said, if you don't approve so and so, I'm going to resign. Then back in his office he was shown a news release saying the president has accepted Secretary Haig's resignation. Haig wanted to say, 'wait, wait, I didn't mean it.' Too late Al, you shouldn't have shot your mouth off.

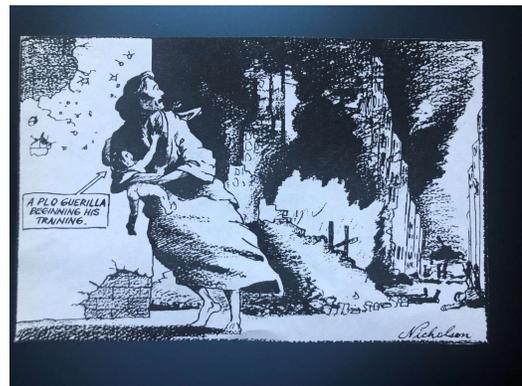
But let's go back to one possible reason why Haig got fired. It had to do with a meeting he had with Ariel Sharon before the war started. Haig didn't like the PLO and he didn't like the Syrians. But he liked Ariel Sharon. At that meeting, Sharon outlined his plan to invade Lebanon. Not up to the Litani but up to Beirut. And U.S. policy was to prevent such a war. But here's what Haig said to him. You decide what those words meant. "You definitely should not send your army into Lebanon . . . unless there is a major provocation." Wait, wait. Say that again. "You definitely should not send your army into Lebanon, *unless* there is a major provocation." That sounds to me like saying, you can send your army into Lebanon if you can think of an excuse. This is the so-called green light. Did Haig give Sharon a green light to invade Lebanon? A lot of people think so. I think so.

Then in June, the Israeli ambassador to Britain was shot in the head. He survived but never recovered. The assassin was from a renegade anti-PLO organization being run by Iraq. They had earlier tried to assassinate Arafat. Based on this provocation Sharon went into Lebanon and when he reached the Litani River he just kept going. It was like a knife cutting through butter. There was no resistance. You know why there was no resistance? Because the Lebanese army was under the control of the allies of Bachir Gemayel and they did not resist the Israelis. They were happy at the thought that the PLO would be finished off.

In six days the Israelis reached Beirut. Six days. But then what? You know, they're like the Americans, They don't like to get down on the ground with their enemies. They don't mind bombing, rockets, missiles, drones, whatever. But getting down on the ground, that's going to get a lot of your people killed. And very soon they are going to have to face the electorate. And sooner or later the electorate is going to say, 'exactly what did we get in exchange for my dead son? Could you explain that?' So the Israelis decided to stay outside of Beirut and to shell the city. Their bombardment of Beirut lasted 89 days. Eighty-nine days. These bombings at times became indiscriminate. At first they were targeting military positions, but then they thought, we'll just bomb the city and that will drive the Lebanese into rejecting the PLO.

Well, if that was their thinking it didn't work

There is a story about that 89 day siege, told by Tom Friedman, who is now an opinion columnist for the *New York Times*. He was their Middle East reporter at the time. He was in Beirut and described a situation in which Arafat was in a bunker, hiding underground during a massive bombing. When the bombing stopped Arafat got out of his bunker and started walking down the street. All the buildings had been destroyed. Over on the side – Friedman described this – there was a Palestinian woman digging in the rubble. She saw Arafat. She got up, and walked over to him and said, "I have three sons, two of them are in that building. The third one is yours." Oh my.



I saw a cartoon at the time. It showed a young mom holding a baby in her arms. She was running hysterically. There were bombs going off all over. Buildings were burning. The world was on fire. The caption said, “future terrorist in training.”

Do you know what happens if you do that to people? We teach them a lesson, right?. No, you don't teach them a lesson. No. The survivors say, ok, my brother died, my father died, you think I'm going to stop?

Most of time I didn't think Ronald Reagan was doing the right thing but once he did. Reagan sent the Marines into Beirut twice. Most people forget that first time because it was so successful, and ended so quickly. The Israelis had bombed for 89 days. The Arab states feared they would just keep bombing until they killed Arafat and destroyed the PLO military or leveled Beirut. They actually asked the American marines to go into Beirut as a peace keeping force. Ok. Let's pause. What is a peace keeping force? It means that there are parties fighting and who want to stop but don't trust each other. They want somebody to come in and walk in between them to make sure that nobody cheats on the truce.

And there was a truce. The Americans came in and by agreement they evacuated all of the PLO soldiers from Beirut. This was an amazing time. They leased some ships from some Greek merchants and filled them up with Palestinian soldiers, and Yasser Arafat, and shipped them all off to Tunis. That is about 1500 miles away. Arafat and the PLO armies stayed there until 1993, when there were allowed to return to Palestine after the Oslo Agreement. When the Americans left, they held a farewell event.

But back to those negotiations. We have an elite group of super diplomats. They are like generals. Any time you have a problem, you just say, “I want you to go out to this place and work out something.” These people are very smart and very skilled. One of those was Philip Habib. He was an American of Lebanese background. He spoke Arabic. So Reagan said, “Phil, I want you to go out there and work out something. We're willing to send in the Marines to help evacuate the PLO, but there's got to be an agreement or this is not going to work.” So Habib negotiated. At a certain point, Arafat said to him, “Our soldiers are protecting those camps. If we pull out, the Palestinian civilians will be without anyone to protect them. And god knows the Israelis could bomb them, or the Lebanese Forces could bomb them, or someone could kill them. They're very exposed. “ And Habib said, with full backing from Washington, “I'm going to make you a guarantee -- that will happen. I am speaking on behalf of the President and we will protect them.” So based on that assurance, the PLO armies pulled out.

But then came a tragedy. Bachir Gemayel was chosen President of Lebanon. This was in the middle of a war and several members of parliament, where the President is elected, stayed away in protest, That left Gemayel's party dominant. That party was called the Phalange in English. That's an old term that was borrowed from Spanish or the Italians. It refers to a disciplined party with a powerful leader and a vision of a united country. Sometimes they were called Fascists, I don't know if that's the right word. It certainly doesn't mean what it meant in Europe. But that was what they were called, the Phalange (or Kataeb in Arabic).

After the election Gemayel went to a rally of his followers and someone blew up the building. It killed him, his wife, his children, the nanny who had lived with them as a member of the family. Oh. This is a **bad** development, because now Gemayel's supporters said, “ok, vengeance time.”

Here's a question. Who was behind that assassination? In the end, a Lebanese politician linked to the Syrians was convicted but at the time many people suspected a Palestinian connection.

And that leads to a conversation that took place at Gemayel's funeral. I wasn't there so I am not sure what happened but there were serious reports. And rumors, and lawsuits, and inflammatory accusations and counter-accusations. Here is the question, based on the fact that there was a massacre in those camps.

Did Ariel Sharon give permission for that massacre? The Israelis at this point controlled access to Sabra and Shatila camps. You could not go into those camps or out without passing through Israeli checkpoints. But the Lebanese Forces went into southern Lebanon and recruited a group called the Damour Vengeance Brigade. Ok. You remember I told you that back in 1975 there had been a killing of some Palestinians. And the Palestinian militants took vengeance by going into the town of Damour. Over 250 Maronite Christians were massacred, maybe even 500. Traumatic was not an adequate word.

We are sometimes taught that suffering is ennobling. You realize from your own suffering that no one should experience such awful things and you swear to fight injustice anywhere. But that is only true of saints. And they are saints *because* they do not react the way the rest of us react. For most of us, suffering poisons our soul and hardens us to the suffering of others.

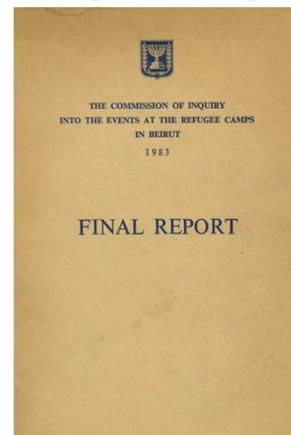
And now, years later, in southern Lebanon, there was a militia called the Damour Vengeance Brigade. Ok, if you turn these people loose in a camp full of unarmed Palestinians, just after their hero has been assassinated, what do you think is going to happen? Of course, you know what will happen.

They were flown in and set loose in Sabra and Shatila. For two plus days the killing continued. It was the Jewish holiday of Rosh Hashanah and there was a story in the *Jerusalem Post*, about a young rabbi who was holding an outdoor service as the sun went down. In the background they could hear the gunshots and screams. The Post said, "this will go down in history at the Rosh Hashanah of Shame." The Israeli military forces stood aside and allowed this massacre to continue.

How many people died? I don't know. The lowest estimate is 800. The Red Crescent, the Palestinian Red Cross, say they buried 3,000 bodies. I think 800 is low, maybe a lot low, but I don't know.

Immediately the Begin government began to say, "We didn't do that. The Christians did that." He said that 2,000 terrorists remained in the camps (or was it 2,500? Does it matter?) But much of the Israeli public turned against the government. Something like a quarter of all Israelis went to a rally in Tel Aviv protesting against the war and the massacres. Begin became particularly intemperate at this point. I want to quote him, but I need to explain the word he used.

There is a Hebrew word for non-Jews – Goy. Most American Jews prefer the more gentle term, Gentile. That is an old Roman term, meaning native people. But Begin preferred that other term. He said, "Goys killing goys and they're coming for the Jews." As Begin saw it, we always get blamed, even when the offenders *and* the victims are non-Jews, and Jews have nothing to do with it. Suggesting that Israel had anything to do with this massacre is just another version of traditional anti-Semitism.



Before we go on, I want to mention that I have a separate podcast on the Kahan Commission Report. This Israeli commission, headed by their Chief Justice, was set up to investigate what happened. They found

wrongdoing on the part of Israelis. It's a really important report. If you have listened to this podcast, you should listen to that as well. It will move beyond the inflammatory rhetoric.

Regarding responsibility, let me tell you a story. I once spoke to a high state department official. He said he had read the report of Diplomat X who had gone into the camps immediately after the killing stopped. "There is no question," he said, "but that Israelis soldiers were in the camps during the massacres." I was excited and asked him how I could get a copy of that report, "You will never see that report. It will never be released. It has top security classification. You have to have special clearance even to read it."

Ok, here is where it gets messy, at least from the American point of view. The Marines went back in for a second time. The first time they went in as a peace keeping force with broad Arab support. This time they went in as a combat force with Arab and Lebanese resistance. Oh my gosh. As I told my students at the time, we became the most incompetent of all the militias inside of Lebanon. Everybody else knew what they were doing. We didn't have the slightest idea. We just thought, "Oh, we're Americans. We're going to go in and everyone will be intimidated and will stand down."

Out in the Mediterranean we had a ship called the New Jersey. Soon the New Jersey was firing into the Shouf Mountains. These are the mountains above Beirut. The Lebanese called these shells "Volkswagens" because they were giant shells as big as cars. They were very destructive.

I had a friend who had once taught in those mountains. She said to me, "I suspect everybody I knew is dead." The American just bombed everything. Suddenly, we were aligning ourselves with the government of Lebanon, which was a faction that only controlled half the city of Beirut. It wasn't a government. It was just a faction of people. When we said, "we're going to back the government and are going to restore order," it sounded bizarre to the Lebanese.

Oh please. Isn't there anybody in Washington who understands Lebanese politics? Well, the answer is yes, they have a lot of people who understand Lebanese politics, but they weren't listening to those people. They were listening to people like Olli North, an extremist, adventurist ideologue.

So what happened? I remember a terrible Sunday morning in May of 1984. I turned on the radio and it said, "there's been an attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut. They have been blown up." What had happened was that a couple of men in a big military truck filled with munitions drove past the security point, shot the guards, and crashed that sucker into the barracks. All those marines were still sleeping. 241 marines died in their sleep, just like that. [**explosion sound**] And the people standing there could hear off in the distance another [**explosion sound**] That was the French barracks blown up at exactly the same time. This was a coordinated effort to drive foreign armies out of Lebanon.

Of course our Vice President at the time, George H.W. Bush, went to Beirut and said, "These are terrorists, we're never going to give in to terrorists." But do you know what, if a foreign army is in your country and you blow them up, that's not terrorism. That's warfare. But terrorism sounds as if we're dealing with deranged, hate-filled people devoid of normal political goals. It is a good word for distracting the public's attention.

At this point President Reagan did two things. First, he said, "This was my fault. I'm taking responsibility., I'm the president." You know what he could have said? "We're going to get to the bottom of this, some people are going to lose their jobs because somebody should have had better security." That

was absolutely true. But that's not the Gipper. He took responsibility. There were good reasons why people admired Reagan. It reminds me of Harry Truman who said, "The buck stops here."

The second thing Reagan did was wait three months and then pull all American troops out of Lebanon. Oh wait, we didn't pull out. That would be retreat. We "redeployed" them to the New Jersey. Redeployed, what does that mean? Well, we moved them offshore (i.e., we pulled out of Lebanon).

If that had been the end of it, that would have been SO nice. But it was only the beginning. Soon a TWA passenger plane got hijacked. This was the first high profile hijacking. They hijacked that plane, flew it from one place to another place, and ended up in Beirut airport. At a certain point, the hijackers went down the aisle and collected passports, wallets, and purses. They soon discovered that one of the Americans -- his name was Stethem -- was a US soldier. They called him up to the front of the plane and blew his brains out right in front of everybody. Well, that gets your attention and makes everybody else nice and compliant. Nobody's going to do anything crazy, like rushing the cockpit. Then they threw Stethem's body out onto the tarmac and left it. Day after day, nobody could get it. These deeds were brutal and horrifying, but they were very effective techniques in this new form of warfare.

And CNN played a role we had not seen before. CNN had just started operating in 1980. Up until that time we had to wait until 6 o'clock to see the news. Now we got 24-hour news. And Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, discovered that all you have to do is hire some consultants and have them talk about what's going on. The average person doesn't understand the issues so if you have some smart people talking, they're going to watch. Or even some breathless reporter from the scene. And he discovered that if you point your camera at that airplane, you can just sit there for hours. Sometimes there are terrifying images but sometimes nothing is happening but people still watch. Ted Turner made a fortune on this. This was a televised reality show.



Finally they negotiated that the hostages would be released. The plane went to Cairo and the hostage takers went free.

There is a sad but slightly funny story about what happened when the hostages were freed. One woman said, "They kept shouting about New Jersey. Why did they hate New Jersey? It's a nice state."

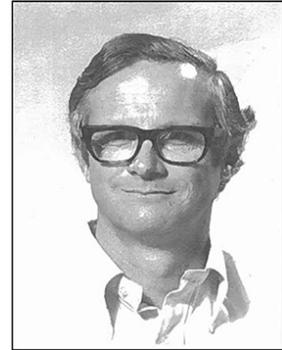
God bless you, madam.

This was the beginning of the time of suicide bombing and the kidnapping of Western people -- missionaries and professors and people married to Lebanese woman who refused to leave. It was also the beginning of Shia militancy, and the rise of Hezbollah.

Among those assassinated was Malcolm Kerr. Now who's Malcolm Kerr? He was a very famous professor of political science, a specialist in the Middle East. He had written a very famous book called *The Arab Cold War*. He was born in Beirut and lived there with his wife and kids. He was a faculty member at UCLA when he was contacted by the American University of Beirut. AUB was started by American Presbyterian missionaries in the mid-1800s. It was one of the best universities in Middle East. The AUB invited Kerr to become their President. They said, "You don't have to go to Lebanon. We just

want to use your connections to raise money. You can do that from Los Angeles.” But Kerr said, “I’m going to Beirut. If I’m going to be the president of AUB, I have to show people that I am actually there.”

So he went to Beirut with his wife. I later got to know her and one of his sons. We worked on a program together. But back in Beirut Malcolm would go to his office early, before the office staff would arrive. One morning someone walked in and killed him, just like that. When the secretaries arrived, they found President Malcolm Kerr lying dead.



By the way, there’s a story with this. There’s always a story. One of his sons was named Steve. You know Steve Kerr. He was a basketball star at University of Arizona. Later he played for the Chicago Bulls and won national titles and he’s now a coach. He’s very outspoken today about Middle East issues and about Black Lives Matter and about gun violence. He’s very outspoken about justice. That’s the way he was brought up. On that terrible day his coach said to him, “Steve, your dad was killed, you do not have to play the game this weekend “ Steve said , “Oh no, my dad would want me to play” Their opponent that weekend was Arizona State. It’s a good university but this was not their finest moment. They’re rivals, those two schools and people in the crowd -- trying to get him flustered so he would miss his shots -- started chanting P-L-O, P-L-O. Those people were lowlife fools. They were also stupid. This had nothing to do with the PLO, but they were just filled with hatred, and they wanted to fluster him. Well, Steve did not fluster. He scored his points. He was determined to honor his father’s memory. Malcolm Kerr and his amazing son Steve.

Let’s think a bit more about the United States in all of this. Let’s go back to the 1970s Henry Kissinger ruled the world. Oh, I’m sorry, Henry Kissinger was Secretary of State. He only *thought* he ruled the world. Richard Nixon was president. United States’ policy in the Middle East was very secure. It rested on a three-legged stool. We had three allies, staunch, strong allies. With those three allies we could dominate the region. One was Iran, under the Shah. When the Arab oil boycott occurred in 1973, the Shah helped us break the boycott by increasing production of Iranian oil to replace Saudi oil. He was a good ally. We gave him so many toys, F-15s, F-16s. And the great thing about Iran was that they could pay Yankee dollars for those toys. With the Israelis, we had to give them foreign aid and then they would be able to buy our toys. And we had Turkey, a very reliable ally. Israel was also a reliable ally. They had a spy network within the Arab states, and within the Soviet Union. And they would do unpleasant things for us that we didn’t want to do ourselves.

So what went wrong? Lets fast forward a bit. The Iranian Revolution occurred in 1979; The Shah got overthrown and was replaced with Ayatollah Khomeini and overnight Iran went [**snap**] just like that from America’s staunch ally to its bitter enemy. Then Menachem Begin, an extremist, got elected prime minister of Israel and immediately invaded Lebanon and created chaos. So we lost two of our three staunch, cautious allies. Israel was still an ally but it was not one that considered our interests before it marched off to war.

That war – the Lebanon war – produced a major escalation of rhetoric between Ronald Reagan and Menachem Begin. As the tension escalated, so did the rhetoric. In one tension-filled incident Reagan called Begin to confront him over the fragmentation bombs we were providing to them. Those bombs had little devices in them – a bit like little girls’ jacks, except they’re really sharp. When the bomb would

explode, anybody within a certain distance would be torn apart. We had a restriction on those weapons. The Israelis could only use them against military personnel. But they began to use them in civilian areas. There was a picture in the newspaper of a little Lebanese girl, as cute little Lebanese girl, who had been killed by those bombs. When Reagan spoke to Begin he said, "Mr. Prime Minister, I have to tell you the image of Israel of is becoming that of a dead Lebanese child."

This statement reflected something happening in American public opinion. In the past, Americans had a very positive image of Israel. It was seen as reasonable and civilized, and always wanting peace, but the Arabs were crazy people who just hated Jews and wouldn't even talk. And now Israel was looking like a violent country. Reagan's statement was harsh, perhaps deserved. But Began reacted very strongly. This is from a letter than Began wrote to Reagan:

"Now may I tell you, Dear Mr. President, how I feel these days when I turn to the creator of my soul with deep gratitude. I feel as a Prime Minister empowered to instruct a valiant army facing "Berlin." Where amongst innocent civilians Hitler and his henchmen hide in a bunker deep beneath the surface."

Let me tell you what Begin was thinking. There is a theme in Jewish culture, especially rightwing culture, that in ancient times there was an enemy called Amalek, who attacked the Hebrews from behind and killed a large number of them. And the teaching is that Amalek arises each generation in a new form. That means that to Begin, 1982 was really 1944, and he was fighting Hitler, not Arafat, and it was the Nazi Party, not the PLO. I'm not in Beirut fighting Yasser Arafat, I'm in Berlin fighting Adolph Hitler. Same thing, same purpose. Hitler is reborn. Let's continue with Begin's letter.

My generation, Dear Ron, swore on the altar of God that whoever proclaims his intent to destroy the Jewish state or the Jewish people or both seals his fate, so that that which happens once with instructions from Berlin – with or without inverted commas -- will never happen again.

Begin thought that Arafat did not want a Palestinian state. He wanted another Holocaust, the extermination of the Jews. He wanted to finish what Hitler had started. He wanted to drive the Jews into the sea.

This is terrifying rhetoric. Some of you may have listened to my podcast on the Holocaust. If so, you know my advice: Don't every use Nazi or Holocaust analogies to discuss anything else. There is nothing like the Holocaust so any comparison is ultimately a form of trivializing the Holocaust. Don't say the Israelis are Nazis and don't say the Palestinians are Nazis. Don't say the Israelis are committing a holocaust upon the Palestinians or that the Palestinians want to commit a holocaust upon the Israelis. The fact that Israelis or Palestinians commit war crimes does not make them Nazis. That cheapens the Holocaust.

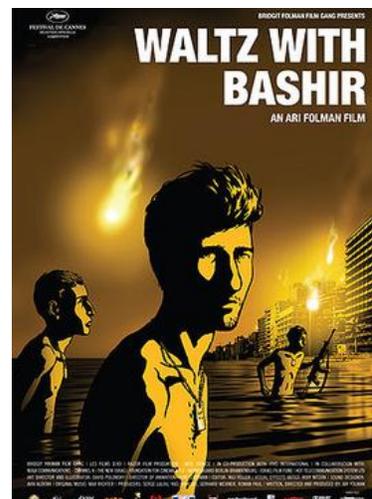
We don't have time to discuss all the implications of this war, but with the U.S. losing one ally and finding it difficult to work with another, we were scrambling to find new allies. Jimmy Carter had won the friendship of Egypt as a result of the Camp David Accords but we needed someone to check Iran. And Saddam Hussein's Iraq was just sitting there. And suddenly Iraq was at war with Iran, which was trying to overthrow his regime. We were never able to say openly that we had decided to back Iraq in that war, but we definitely did. We used slight of hand to shift weapons into Iraq, even as we renounced its regime. How much better if Ronald Reagan had delivered a national address to the American people:

“We are facing a very bad situation in the Gulf. There are two truly evil regimes at war with each other, both led by brutal leaders. We might wish that both would continue this war forever until both are destroyed. [Actually Henry Kissinger said almost those exact words]. But in politics you have to make choices. If Iraq wins that war, the Iraqi people will be under a brutal dictatorship. If Iran wins, Islamic extremism will spread throughout the region and the world will be destabilized. We have decided to back Saddam.”

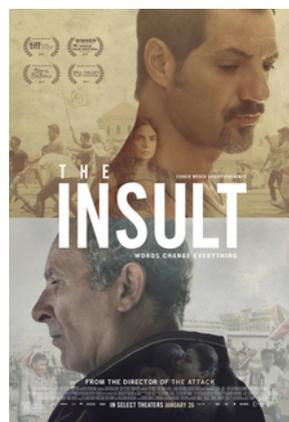
I may be naïve, but I think the American people could have understood that. But that talk was never delivered. So we had policies of deceit and misrepresentation, and raging anger.

Before we move on, I want to mention a movie called *Waltz with Bashir*. It was nominated for an Academy Award around 2000. Of course the Bashir in the title is Bachir Gemayel. It is based on a graphic novel. It’s about an Israeli who had been in Lebanon. Now he is having nightmares about vicious dogs. He goes to a psychiatrist who tells him he is reliving something that he can’t acknowledge. “You were in Lebanon, weren’t you? What happened there? Who else was in your unit? Do you stay in touch with those people? Go talk to them.”

So he did and he discovered that others are also suffering. It turns out they were there during Sabra and Shatila. I’m going to let you look that up on your own.



Another film you might want to consider is a Lebanese film called *The Insult*. It was also nominated for an Academy Award. It is about a government inspector in Beirut who



quotes someone for having a dripping pipe. It sounds routine, doesn’t it. And yet one person calls the other person a rude name and the issue escalates. As it turns out, the inspector is a Palestinian whose family was in Sabra and Chatilla, and the homeowner is a Maronite Christian from Damour who is a great admirer of Bachir Gemayel. This minor clash escalates into a major national confrontation. Both films have a common message. As William Faulkner put it, the past is not really past.

Let me make one last comment about that little town I mentioned earlier, the one right on the border. It is called Bint Jbeil – that means daughter of the mountain. I’ve never been to Lebanon but I have seen pictures and it is a beautiful city. When the Israelis invaded, the first town they came to was Bint Jbeil. And you know what, they were greeted as heroes. Do you know why? Because the Palestinians had mistreated Bint Jbeil. They had a camp nearby, a base where they were supposed to stay, but they did not. They would set up roadblocks in the middle of Bint Jbeil, they bossed people around. You know, it doesn’t matter how sympathetic you are to the Palestinian situation, if you have to put up with that you’re kind of glad when someone comes in and kicks a little PLO patootie. Of course, Bint Jbeil is also the place where Hezbollah, Israel’s greatest enemy, got started. But wait, you ask. How can the most pro-Israeli place become the most anti-Israeli place? Well, I’ll tell you how. You just go in and you stay for 18 years and you lock up people and you shoot young men and you bomb and destroy places. They’ll turn on you very quickly. That’s what happened. In a sense the Israeli occupation *created* Hezbollah. It

didn't exist before. It grew up as a resistance force with a lot of help from Iran who was giving them training and weapons.

I once had a student, a Christian from Jordan. Someone in the community died, a man who was Lebanese Shia. There was a wake. The men sit around and talk to each other and talk about their friend. Everybody in that room was a Shia Muslim except for my student. And there was a man there who was a bigot, an anti-Christian bigot. He started making snide comments about Christians, calling them Crusaders, which is a way to suggest that the Christian Lebanese or the Christian Jordanians or the Christian Palestinians are invaders, not really a part of *us*. The other men did not like this. Finally somebody said to him, "you're from Bint Jbeil and you know that when the Israelis came in, you welcomed them as heroes and waved little Israeli flags at them, so don't accuse someone else of being a traitor to the Arab cause." Well, that shut him up.

I had another student, also a Lebanese Shia. She said that her brother, who was in the resistance, had been taken by the Israelis to a detention camp within Israel. After years in detention he had been released in an exchange. Later, Israeli soldiers burst into his home and shot him dead, with his wife and children watching. But she said, "I am willing to live in peace with them if they will stay on their side of the border.

This conflict is not as simple as the headlines would suggest.

Ok, let me tell you one last story. In May, 2000 classes were over and I was sitting in my living room. For those who know the area, I live in northeast Dearborn about two blocks from Warren, just near Schaffer. It's a very Lebanese neighborhood and Warren, a major east-west road, is filled with Lebanese businesses. I was just reading and I heard horns honking and people cheering and I thought, "this is kind of odd. It must be a wedding." But it kept going and I thought, this is the biggest wedding I've ever heard. After a time, I walked out and I looked down the street. I saw cars and cars and cars. Warren was packed. So I thought, ok, I'm going to walk down and see what's going on. What was going on was that the Israelis had just pulled out of Lebanon and people were celebrating.

I had not even heard it on the news. Moreover, every morning I get an email from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Israelis are very good at public relations. They like to keep people up to date. Saturday is their Sabbath so offices are closed but the cabinet meets on Sunday morning. The cabinet meeting that Sunday had decided they would pull out of Lebanon. They asked their military leaders how long it would take to get the Israeli forces out. They were told about two weeks. Do you know what. This was two days later. They didn't evacuate, they fled. Their army was out even before I got that email on the cabinet meeting.

That reminded me of our catastrophe in Vietnam. We had a very nice plan for a phased withdrawal in 1974. We were going to pull out a little bit at a time. We had allies who were going to cover our backside while we withdrew. You know what, we just fled. I have very sad memories of seeing helicopters leaving from the top of the American embassy. Those helicopters, heading out to American ships offshore, had people holding on to the bottom rails. They were never going to get to those ships. They couldn't hold on that long but that was their last chance to get out. We were humiliated and driven out. We didn't have an honorable exit. The Israelis did not have an honorable exit. They fled. As someone said about our 2021 departure from Afghanistan, "there is no graceful way to lose a war."

Interestingly, the Israelis allowed some of their Lebanese allies, the Southern Lebanese Army, to flee with them. And some of them – you will have to take my word on this – ended up in Dearborn. There was a man who was assassinated right in my neighborhood. Just half a mile from my house. It was mysterious, nobody knows who did it. Well, he was SLA so we can guess.

Thanks for listening.