

ERIC MARGOLIS



Moral defeat

The marines may be out of Beirut but new revelations about the U.S. role in Lebanon may seriously damage President Reagan in this election year. America's incredible record of blunders in Lebanon is coming to resemble the 1956 Franco-British Suez disaster.

● The PLO Connection — the *New York Times* has "broken" the story of how the State Department, then under Alexander Haig, conducted nine months of secret talks with PLO leaders through American intermediaries. Actually, the *Sun* first broke this intriguing story in my column of Nov. 28, 1983.

These talks were aimed at a peaceful settlement between Israel and the PLO. The "moderate" Palestinian leaders — including Arafat — who took part in them risked their lives; one of them, Issam Sartawi, was later murdered by Palestinian extremists.

I have obtained an exclusive interview with one of the American intermediaries; here is what really occurred. PLO leaders thought they were close to an agreement. But instead, Haig ordered that nothing be done and these peace efforts ignored. Besides listening with deaf ears, Haig and Reagan were planning something quite different.

● The Not So Surprise Invasion — Israel's right-wing government, led by Menachem Begin and Ariel Sharon, decided in late 1981 to invade Lebanon, an action made possible after the Camp David peace treaty with Egypt gave Israel a free hand in Lebanon.

Sharon's sweeping plan was aimed at eradicating the PLO military and political structure, thus cementing Israel's rule on the occupied West Bank. A client Christian regime was to be put in charge of Lebanon and the Syrians taught a lesson.

Haig approved this plan in January, 1982 — while talking peace with the PLO. Six months later Israel invaded Lebanon, claiming the "Peace in Galilee" operation was only to secure its northern settlements. President Reagan reacted for the record with "dismay" and "surprise." Talks with the PLO were broken off.

Unexpectedly fierce resistance by the PLO caused Israel to resort to massive bombing and shelling rather than risk severe losses in urban fighting. In the process, some 10,000 Lebanese and Palestinian civilians became casualties while the world watched in fascinated horror.

This carnage, followed by the gruesome massacres of Palestinians at Shatilla and Sabra, caused cold feet in Washington. What was to have been a "neurological strike," in the words of the aggressively obtuse Haig, turned into a bloodbath. Reagan pressured Israel into halting its meat-grinder tactics and fired Haig.

President Reagan, with fine hypocrisy, then claimed the role of "honest broker" and sent "peacekeeping" troops to help restore the "sovereignty of Lebanon." All of this after encouraging Israel to invade and then paying all of the costs of the operation.

Invasion of Lebanon

The Israeli press has also claimed that Sharon invaded Lebanon in order to stop the U.S.-PLO talks, of which he was aware. This view is given some credence by the assassination of the PLO's chief liaison with the CIA by Israeli hit teams.

What's to be made of all this? First, the U.S., by encouraging Israel to invade Lebanon, indulged in the same sort of activity for which it routinely condemns Cuba and Russia. How are we going to listen to Reagan's blasts at "Russian aggression" when he has been caught in similar activity?

Second, who will trust the U.S. after its incredible series of blunders in the Middle East? Reagan has veered from negotiating with the Arabs to bombing them; he has cold-shouldered the Israelis and then fawned on them; his policies have changed every three months. Who in the PLO will ever negotiate with the U.S. after the sordid record of the Haig "talks"? What sensible Israeli leader will put his nation's security in the hands of the U.S.?

Third, who will pay the butcher's bill for all the devastation in Lebanon? In the 12 months before the Israeli invasion, Israel's northern border with Lebanon had been relatively tranquil. The Haig-Sharon invasion fiasco caused over 10,000 civilian casualties in Lebanon, 571 Israeli and almost 300 American dead. It cost the U.S. \$1.4 billion last year and now costs Israel \$1.2 million per day. For what?

Fourth, who are the winners? Syria, Lebanon's Muslim majority and Iran — the very same people who were on top before the U.S.-Israeli invasion devastated Lebanon. And Russia, of course.

The Lebanese mess shows that the U.S. and Israel cannot shoot their way to victory in the Middle East — too many people are now willing to die to oppose them. It also demonstrates that America, far from being able to resolve the region's problems, is an integral part of them. American interference has managed to inflate local tribal squabbles into world-class issues.

Perhaps worst, the U.S. has been exposed as a hypocrite and liar. The whole world can now see the lugubrious fiction of "honest brokers" and "valiant peacekeepers."

People will inevitably ask, what was so very different about Afghanistan and Lebanon. In both countries, unpopular minority governments invited in powerful neighbors to help quell internal opposition. Muslim guerrillas in Afghanistan fighting the leftists in Kabul are heroic freedom fighters; Muslims in Lebanon are "fanatics."

The bottom line: A wholly unnecessary strategic and moral defeat for the United States.

(Eric Margolis is a member of the Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies)