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Weak grasp of world affairs

I heard a frightening story recently that sounds all too true. During a meeting with high-level Israeli officials, President Reagan explained his view of the Middle East.

"There are Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Middle East," the president is alleged to have said. "They are all good, God-fearing people. All of the problems there are caused by the communists."

Whether apocryphal or true, this tale highlights much of the current thinking in the Reagan administration. American foreign policy is being run by a group of California businessmen and political operatives whose knowledge of world affairs, before they moved to Washington, hardly extended beyond the Rocky Mountains.

Take the example of William Clark. Before his recent demotion to the department of the interior, Clark dominated American foreign policy in his role of national security adviser. During his Senate confirmation hearings, Clark was unable to answer some very basic questions about foreign affairs and demonstrated a very limited grasp of the world east of Denver.

One Senate wit was heard to remark, "Judge Clark's sole experience in foreign affairs was at the International House of Pancakes." Clark, who tried hard, never mastered his job and was largely responsible for involving the U.S. as a combatant in the dreadful Lebanese civil war. Clark's astounding blunders in Lebanon were likely the cause of his transfer to the department of the interior.

Shiite or Druze?

Few senior members of the Reagan administration appeared capable of telling the difference between a Shiite or a Druze. None of Reagan's advisers appeared ready to listen to the state department professionals who could. Since Lebanon's complexities were so overwhelming, a simple solution emerged: Blame it on the Russians. Even the Israelis did not remotely believe in the comic-book simplicity.

In his Oct. 27 speech to the nation, Reagan insisted that if the U.S. withdrew from Lebanon the entire Middle East would fall to the Russians. This is utter nonsense and serves as a camouflage to cover America's awful blunder in allowing itself to be drawn into Lebanon's civil war. The idea that 2,000-odd besieged Marines in Beirut were holding back the Soviet Empire is laughable. Rather than staving off the Russians, the American garrison in Beirut appears daily more like the "55 Days at Peking" during the Chinese Boxer Rebellion.

This naivete on the part of Reagan's advisers did, however, have one beneficial result. When it became apparent that Cuban military forces were rapidly taking over the island of Grenada, Reagan's team decided to take immediate action and world public opinion be damned. A more sophisticated administration may well have hesitated.

For once, the Reagan team made the right decision. When U.S. forces landed in Grenada, they were not met by happy Cuban civilian workers; defending the island were two heavily-armed Cuban combat engineer battalions, backed by Russians, East German and Bulgarian advisers. The Russians and Cubans were, in this case, a very clear threat.

By invading Grenada, the administration removed what would undoubtedly have become another communist bastion in the Caribbean. This action was unpleasant, unpopular and it cast the U.S. in the role of an international bully. But, by taking decisive action, Reagan spared the U.S. and its Caribbean allies from having to fight a far bloodier battle at some later date. Had the U.S. delayed, Grenada would shortly have been garrisoned by another 5,000 Cuban troops, a little communist Gibraltar astride our vital trade routes from the Panama Canal.

Simple solutions

The choice in Grenada was simple and thus lent itself to the simplistic solutions favored by the Reagan administration. Unfortunately, America's other problems around the world lack this sharp definition and polarity. So complex is the situation in Lebanon, for example, that the administration cannot even find a target against which to retaliate for the bombing of the Marine headquarters in Beirut.

Having done the right thing in Grenada, there will be an undeniable temptation in Washington to duplicate such a surgical strike elsewhere. Military solutions may work on a little island but they are unlikely to do so in Central America or the Middle East. The U.S. is also fast running out of Marines and ships: There are simply not enough to go around.

In spite of success in Grenada, the Reagan administration still faces the problem of a dangerous inexperience in world affairs. Russian foreign policy is being run by experienced professionals who have been in office for 20 years. U.S. foreign policy is being conducted by men who, eight years ago, were handling real estate matters or worrying about sewer systems in Pasadena. Their motives are right and their instincts sound, but these senior Republicans, like many of their fellow Californians, have only a very limited knowledge of the world that comes from the shallow, myopic medium of television news.

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