

THE BEIRUT BOMBING OF OCTOBER 1983: AN ACT OF TERRORISM?

by

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The Commission believes that the most important message it can bring to the Secretary of Defense is that the 23 October 1983 attack on the Marine Battalion Landing Team Headquarters in Beirut was tantamount to an act of war using the medium of terrorism.¹

The release of the report prepared by the Department of Defense commission chaired by Admiral Robert L. J. Long evoked an immediate outburst of public acclaim. So warm was the public response, and so evident the intellectual probity of both the investigation of the bombing and the report, that within US defense circles the work of the Long Commission quickly came to be regarded as an authoritative source of information and guidance.

Although the report is not perfect in all respects, errors of fact or moot interpretations cannot detract from the signal service rendered by the Long Commission: the injection of reason, common sense, and military professionalism into an otherwise undistinguished public debate over America's role in Lebanon. This article will address the commission's conclusions and recommendations concerning terrorism. The thesis argued

here is that the killing of 241 Americans at the Beirut International Airport was *not* an act of terrorism, but an unconventional military assault against a military target. That the victims and their chain of command never seemed to realize they were at war in Lebanon only serves to compound the tragedy; that the United States may be considering a multifaceted policy of activism against "terrorism" may only make matters worse. Indeed, whatever merit there may be in a "proactive" stance toward terrorism, it should not be derived from the American experience in Lebanon, of all places. To do so would be to adopt the wrong policies for the wrong reasons, and perhaps to prolong the loss of American lives in Lebanon.

This article consists of three parts: an examination of the circumstances surrounding the 23 October 1983 bombing; a brief inquiry into the nature of terrorism and its relationship to that tragic event; and a conclusion which urges that the questions of what to do about Lebanon and how to proceed on international terrorism be separated. Priority of effort on the latter question should be devoted to rigorous intelligence analysis focused on definitions, linkages, and rational options. The question

of what to do about Lebanon centers, at this juncture, on the very basic matter of keeping our diplomats in that country safe.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE BOMBING

On 23 October 1983, a truck laden with the equivalent of over 12,000 pounds of TNT crashed through the perimeter of the compound of the U.S. contingent of the Multinational Force at Beirut International Airport, Beirut, Lebanon, penetrated the Battalion Landing Team Headquarters building and detonated. The force of the explosion destroyed the building resulting in the deaths of 241 U.S. military personnel.²

Despite the contentious nature of the debate surrounding US actions in Lebanon, there are several key points whose validity is not likely to be challenged, and whose presence in the Long Commission report makes it virtually unassailable in its dissection of American policy.

First, it is acknowledged now that progress toward the restoration of central authority in Lebanon during 1982 and 1983 was purely illusory. The seemingly positive response of a few Lebanese army units to American training and equipping provided some with a false indicator of progress. Yet Lebanon remained, as the Long Commission suggested, "a veritable jungle of threats."³

Second, it can be broadly agreed that certain of those who prowled that jungle—Syrians, Iranians, Palestinian rejectionists, and so forth—were not favorably disposed toward either America's Middle East policy or its armed presence in Lebanon. Whereas the United States may have perceived its support of Lebanese President Gemayel as being purely in the service of nonpartisanship and legitimacy, others chose to view matters quite differently, a fact that transcends the rights and wrongs of the issue.⁴

Third, the internal Lebanese view of the nature of the US military presence in Lebanon underwent a fundamental change between September 1982 and October 1983. US forces, initially regarded by their Shi'ite Lebanese neighbors in Beirut's southern

suburbs as protectors in the wake of the September 1982 Sabra-Shatila massacre, were by October 1983 viewed by many of the same people as partisans of their enemies in the unresolved Lebanese civil war. The fact of altered perceptions, as discussed by the Long Commission,⁵ is beyond dispute, and questions of who or what is to blame—Syria, Iran, Israel, the Lebanese, or international terrorists—embellish rather than alter this fact.

These three propositions taken together suggest a fourth: that good intentions are sometimes misunderstood by the very people being aided. The initial American objective in Lebanon was eminently decent, to clean up the mess left behind by Israel and help the Lebanese people recover. Yet even at this late date, even in the wake of yet another bombing, it may still come as a shock to many Americans to learn that there are people in Lebanon who (a) regard themselves as being at war with the United States, and (b) consider the United States to have *initiated* this war through continued American support for Israel and past US support for the late Shah of Iran. This statement is not a proposal either to change present policies or to apologize for those of the past. Rather, it is a plea for recognition of the possibility that the law of unintended effects applies just as readily to America's Middle East policies as it does to other aspects of daily life.

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Two key questions remain: Who directed the 23 October 1983 attack, and why? The Long Commission concluded that the bombing "was committed by a revolutionary organization within the cognizance of, and with possible support from two neighboring states."⁶ It would seem that the act was undertaken by Iranian-supported Lebanese Shi'ite radicals who also may have received some assistance from Syria.⁷

Assuming that the perpetrators were correctly identified, determining the "why" poses no great obstacle. Consider those who would have benefitted from such an attack: a viscerally anti-American regime of Shi'ite clerics in Tehran, at war with Iraq, having Lebanese allies, and itself the victim of bloody, politically motivated bombings; and an unpopular, minority-based regime in Damascus, seeking a political victory in Lebanon in order to reverse fully the military setback of June 1982. Add to these a restive Shi'ite community in Lebanon, facing Israeli occupation in the south and a Maronite-dominated Lebanese army in Beirut, both enjoying American support. One more volatile ingredient makes the combustible mixture complete: a decision by the United States in September 1983 to openly enter the Lebanese conflict by pumping naval gunfire into Suq al-Gharb on behalf of Gemayel's army. From that point, the Marine BLT Headquarters at Beirut International Airport assumed the character of a lucrative military target.

A NEW DIMENSION OF WARFARE?

An objective definition of international terrorism is required to avoid politically-loaded confusion Furthermore, an objective definition . . . can be an extremely useful guide for decision-makers confronted with policy, claims, context, and other questions involving legal competence and jurisdiction.⁸

Scholars have long debated the precise meaning of terrorism, but no universally accepted definition has emerged, and none will be attempted here. Yet the word must

have some objective meaning, for the Long Commission concluded, on the basis of a definition, that the act of 23 October 1983 was one of terrorism. The commission determined that the bombing "met the criteria of a terrorist act as defined in DOD Directive 2000.12," that is, "the unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence by a revolutionary organization against individuals or property, with the intention of coercing or intimidating governments or societies, often for political or ideological reasons."⁹

There are severe defects in the definition provided by the DOD directive. Indeed, the commission itself recognized that by limiting the applicability of the term to the activities of "revolutionary organizations," the directive was overlooking the obvious: that states are fully capable of using terrorism; that they have used it and continue to use it both against their own citizens as well as against other states.

Worse, however, is the failure of the directive to develop the definition logically. The phrase "often for political or ideological reasons" is misleading, for that which distinguishes terrorism from other criminal activity is precisely its political and ideological nature. Furthermore, by defining as terrorism that violence which is used to "coerce" or "intimidate," the directive is, in effect, saying that all revolutionary violence is terrorism, for virtually all revolutionary activity aims at coercion and intimidation. Are we to conclude, therefore, that the Nicaraguan *contras* are engaged in terrorism, with the United States serving as their state sponsor? That conclusion is inescapable if we rely on the DOD definition. Ironically, the late Ernesto (Che) Guevara, writing over 20 years ago, helps lead us around the trap we have set for ourselves. He does so by pointing out the obvious: that not all revolutionary activities are terroristic.

It is necessary to distinguish clearly between sabotage, a revolutionary and highly effective method of warfare, and terrorism, a measure that is generally ineffective and indiscriminate in its results, since it often

makes victims of innocent people and destroys a large number of lives that would be valuable to the revolution . . . Sabotage has nothing to do with terrorism.¹⁰

Although Guevara does not define terrorism, he uncovers its salient characteristic: indiscriminate results which victimize innocent people. Paul Wilkinson, a leading academic authority on the subject, characterizes the symptoms of political terror in terms of "indiscriminateness, unpredictability, arbitrariness, ruthless destructiveness and the implicitly amoral and antinomian nature of a terrorist's challenge."¹¹ He goes on to define political terrorism as "the systematic use of murder and destruction, and the threat of murder and destruction in order to terrorize individuals, groups, communities or governments into conceding to the terrorists' political demands."¹² In other words, while the terror campaign is itself systematic, it employs methods that feature arbitrary death and destruction; as the French strategist Raymond Aron has observed, "The lack of discrimination helps spread fear, for if no one in particular is a target, no one can be safe."¹³ Professor Jordan J. Paust of the University of Houston College of Law, in his analysis of some legal ramifications of international terrorism, further refines this concept by pointing out that the terrorist's victim is but an "instrumental target," one victimized "in order to communicate to a primary target a threat of future violence." The object, according to Paust, is "to use intense fear or anxiety to coerce the primary target into certain behavior or to mold its attitudes in connection with a demanded power (political) outcome."¹⁴ Thinking perhaps of Algerian terrorists blowing up buses filled with fellow Arabs in order to undermine French legitimacy, or of Japanese terrorists at Lod Airport murdering scores of Puerto Rican pilgrims in order to intimidate the Israeli government, William Lineberry, who edited a major work on terrorism, observes that "unlike the soldier, the guerrilla, or the revolutionist, the terrorist therefore is always in the paradoxical

position of undertaking actions the immediate physical consequences of which are not particularly desired by him."¹⁵ Whereas the soldier kills for the sake of certain outcomes whose impact is immediate—destroying a target, taking an objective, or defending himself and his comrades—the terrorist often sees no immediate connection between his victim and his ultimate target.

Using the definitional elements outlined above, it is difficult to categorize the 23 October 1983 bombing as an act of terrorism. Whatever else it may have been, it was not indiscriminate violence visited upon innocent bystanders who collectively constituted an instrumental target, or an act whose immediate consequences were not desired by the assailants.

In labeling the incident "terrorism" as defined by the DOD directive (as opposed to a military assault), the Long Commission emphasized the "political" nature of the act, arguing that "no attempt was made to seize Marine positions or to drive Marines from the airport."¹⁶ Yet surely not all military operations aim at seizing and holding terrain. The important point is that the DOD definition dictated that the "political message" implied by the act, which was one of "opposition to the U.S. military presence in Lebanon,"¹⁷ be emphasized. Yet even if we accept as valid the existence of a political message, clearly the enemy chose not to delay or draw out its delivery by means of a terror campaign. Instead, an audacious direct assault, one "beyond the imagination of those responsible for Marine security,"¹⁸ was employed at a cost of one truck and one driver. Had he instead flown an aircraft to bomb the building to the ground, who would call it terrorism?

Having categorized the bombing as a political act in order to satisfy the DOD definition, the Long Commission was finally obliged by the facts to conclude that terrorism represents "a new dimension of warfare."¹⁹ All of this could have been avoided had DOD Directive 2000.12 been discarded as irrelevant and the act of 23 October 1983 been examined in terms of

unconventional warfare directed against a military target. The definition of unconventional warfare found in JCS Pub. 1 not only squares quite accurately with the event in question, but even satisfies the Long Commission's valid complaint that the DOD definition of terrorism omitted the matter of state sponsorship:

Unconventional warfare. A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations conducted in enemy-held, enemy-controlled or politically sensitive territory. Unconventional warfare includes, but is not limited to, the interrelated fields of guerrilla warfare, evasion and escape, and other operations of a low visibility, covert or clandestine nature. These interrelated aspects of unconventional warfare may be prosecuted singly or collectively by predominantly indigenous personnel, *usually supported and directed in varying degrees by (an) external source(s) during all conditions of war or peace.*²⁰

It is critically important to remember that the Long Commission determined only that "the 23 October bombing met the criteria of a terrorist act *as defined in DOD Directive 2000.12.*"²¹ In this regard the commission deserves no criticism, for it was obliged to work with a preordained commission title which included the words "Terrorist Incident," a defective DOD definition of terrorism, and an act which, given the Lebanese scene and American role described by the commission, amounted to nothing more than a military assault against a military installation. Neither common sense nor the DOD definition of unconventional warfare implies that there is anything new about this particular dimension of warfare.

IMPLICATIONS

The critical reader of this article should be asking himself, So what? So what if the bombing of 23 October 1983 does not fit broadly acceptable definitions of terrorism? Does that make the act itself any different? Will the loved ones of the victims feel better knowing that it was an act of unconventional

warfare, not international terrorism, which brought down that building? Clearly, if this article has any practical value, it will be in its prescription of where we should go from here.

If we are convinced that these attacks in Lebanon occur because foreign powers orchestrate them, and if we wish to take up this gauntlet, then we must, as Clausewitz suggests, seek out the enemy's center of gravity. What good would it do to chase Shi'ite militants around Lebanon, either militarily or through an expensive and extraordinarily problematical Human Intelligence (HUMINT) program, if it is Iran (for instance) pulling the strings? If Iran directed the operation that killed 241 Americans, clearly we must seek our remedy from the authorities in Tehran. If indigenous Lebanese are wholly responsible, we must decide whether our continued presence on the Lebanese battlefield promises an outcome commensurate with the costs.

If, however, we insist on viewing the continuing victimization of Americans in Lebanon as the work of an international terror network, we run the risk of chasing phantoms and straying further from the enemy's center of gravity. In trying to gauge how much time, resources, and effort should be devoted to the specific problem of international terrorism, one suggestion is offered: subtract Lebanon from the equation. Our problem in Lebanon has little to do with international terrorism; it has everything to do with being at war inadvertently at a time and place of the enemy's choosing. If, as the Long Commission correctly asserts, the attack of 23 October 1983 "was tantamount to an act of war,"²² and if we are determined to strike back at those who continue to hit Americans in Lebanon, let us at least not delude ourselves as to the nature of the problem. To link the tragedy of 23 October 1983 with a broader international phenomenon is simultaneously to exaggerate and debase its significance, for while the brutal assault tells us little about the dynamics of international terrorism, it speaks volumes about an undeclared war being waged by Iran against the United States in Lebanon.

What is required, therefore, is first that we divide the two questions: the issue of what to do about Lebanon should be distinct from the question of what to do about international terrorism.

The Long Commission urged there be a "reassessment of alternative means to achieve U.S. objectives in Lebanon," one which would "reduce the risk" to the Marines.²³ The Marines have been withdrawn, but the September 1984 bombing of the American Embassy Annex suggests that whatever reassessment may have taken place, it did not conclude that armed elements in Lebanon consider themselves at war with the United States. Why else would we insist that our official facilities be readily accessible to a public that includes hundreds or thousands bent on murder and mayhem? The reassessment called for by the commission needs to be pursued seriously and should focus on two closely related questions: First, what defensive measures are needed to prevent successful assaults from being made on American diplomats and facilities in Lebanon? Second, what will it take to dissuade Iran from orchestrating attacks on Americans in Lebanon and elsewhere?

With respect to international terrorism, our intelligence community has a massive task. Until we feel confident in our understanding of the phenomenon, priority of effort should go to analysis. We need a rational definition of terrorism, one that is internally logical and that draws upon the enormous efforts already made in academia. We must clarify in a dispassionate and nonideological manner the linkages between individual terrorist groups themselves, and between states and terrorist groups, moving

beyond the journalistic impressionism which has dominated public discussion. Only when an analytical framework is constructed should we begin to consider a radically expanded HUMINT effort or operations involving military forces. The old saw, "Act in haste, repent at leisure," is nowhere more applicable than in the twilight zone of international terrorism.

NOTES

1. US Department of Defense, *Report of the DOD Commission on Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983*, 20 December 1983, p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 57, 62.
8. Jordan J. Paust, "Private Measures of Sanction," in *Legal Aspects of International Terrorism*, ed. Alona E. Evans and John F. Murphy (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1978), p. 576.
9. *Report of the DOD Commission*, p. 122.
10. Ernesto Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: MR Press, 1961), p. 26.
11. Paul Wilkinson, *Political Terrorism* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), p. 17.
12. Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism and The Liberal State* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977), p. 49.
13. Raymond Aron, *Peace and War* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), p. 170.
14. Paust, p. 577.
15. William P. Lineberry, ed., *The Struggle Against Terrorism* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1977), p. 27.
16. *Report of the DOD Commission*, p. 122.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 127.
20. US Department of Defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (JCS Pub. 1), 1 April 1984, p. 383. Emphasis added.
21. *Report of the DOD Commission*, p. 122. Emphasis added.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

