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This article seeks to explain why the Reagan administration did not retaliate more forcefully against those it believed to be responsible for the 1983 attack on a Marine barracks in Beirut that left 241 Americans dead. Cummins’s research starts from the reasonable premise that the absence of “swift and effective retribution” is difficult to understand given the scale of the atrocity and President Ronald Reagan’s hawkish rhetoric on confronting terrorism (330). Cummins also highlights Reagan’s willingness to authorize retaliatory strikes against Libya in response to the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque in 1986 that killed two American servicemen and a Turkish civilian. Reagan swiftly blamed the terrorist attack on Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi and US airstrikes were launched nine days after the bombing.

The article dismisses the explanation, advanced by some former Reagan officials,¹ that the United States lacked clear evidence for who was responsible for the attack, or intelligence identifying suitable targets for retaliatory strikes. Cummins points to research showing that US intelligence had “24-karat proof” that Iran was responsible, having intercepted a message from the Iranian ambassador at Damascus directing the leader of Hezbollah, to organize “a spectacular attack against the American Marines” (332). Furthermore, the Pentagon had identified several Hezbollah sites in Lebanon that it believed were central to its terrorist activities. Even if it had not, punitive strikes against any Iranian military facilities would not seem to have been particularly difficult to justify given that US officials believed the Islamic Republic had just murdered 241 Americans.

Reagan himself later explained in his memoir that he was too worried about potential civilian collateral damage to authorize strikes.² Cummins’s account disputes this, arguing that Reagan had in fact approved a plan to launch strikes that had “the ability to avoid civilian casualties” (342). Yet the plan was never carried out. It is already widely known that the senior official responsible for blocking it was Caspar Weinberger, the secretary of defense.³ Weinberger later claimed that the French informed them about their own plans for

¹ This was Weinberger’s explanation. See David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The inside Story of America’s War on Terrorism* (New York: Harpercollins, 1988), 138.

² Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 463–64.

³ See Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 131–32. Also, Colonel Timothy J. Geraghty, *Peacekeepers at War, Beirut 1983—The Marine Commander Tells His Story* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 181.

retaliatory strikes too late for the US to join in. It was therefore solely left to the French, who had lost fifty-eight soldiers in a near simultaneous attack in Beirut, to launch airstrikes against Hezbollah facilities.

Cummins is unimpressed with Weinberg's account, and points to documentary evidence showing how much detailed planning had already occurred between the French and US militaries. We also know from other studies of this period that other members of the Reagan administration, most notably Robert McFarlane, strongly opposed Weinberger's veto on military action. McFarlane later lamented how America's passivity had only emboldened Iran,⁴ and notes in his memoir that when he told the president about what had happened, he expressed his disappointment that they hadn't "blown the living daylights out of them."⁵ A number of other studies also show that Secretary of State George Shultz was a proponent of military action.⁶

The main contribution of Cummins's article is its explanation of why Weinberger took this position. What emerges is a portrait of a highly *realist* approach to foreign policy, where Cold War grand strategy and the practical realities of implementing the Carter Doctrine trumped the emotional satisfaction of retaliation. To achieve America's much broader strategic objectives in the Middle East, which revolved around containing the Soviet threat and preserving Western access to Persian Gulf oil, Weinberger wanted to enhance Washington's strategic alliance network and rebuild American military capabilities. To this end, Washington needed stable regional partners who felt they owed their security in no inconsiderable part to an American military presence in region. Cummins tries to explain why Weinberger believed that retaliatory strikes would undermine this goal.

The article is divided (informally rather than structurally) into two research questions. Firstly, why not launch retaliatory strikes against Iranian targets? Secondly, why not target Hezbollah facilities inside Lebanon? It's an important distinction because, as the article shows, US officials perceived different risks and strategic calculations to launching military action against Hezbollah or Iran. In relation to attacking Iran, the author's argument is that US officials were reluctant to confront Iran for wider Cold War concerns. The main thinking behind this was that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, for all his faults, was at least a bulwark to Soviet encroachment. US officials were concerned that aggressively confronting Iran would rule out a future strategic alliance and/or weaken the regime to the point that it might be toppled by leftist groups or tempt the Soviets to intervene. Cummins also links the policy of restraint to Washington's so-called "tilt" towards supporting Iraq in its war against Iran, a decision that reflected anxieties about recent Iranian military successes and the need to reassure moderate Arab allies that Washington was a reliable ally.

Cummins's article thus starts to draw lines between the strategic logic underpinning restraint against Iran after the 1983 attack against the Marines and the infamous Iran-Contra affair that occurred several years later. The main line is that influential US officials who were involved in both events, most notably Weinberger, saw Iran as Washington's "strategic choice" and had not given up on rebuilding some kind of anti-Communist alliance with moderate forces in Tehran.⁷ It was the same strategic logic that led members of the Carter administration to advise a policy of restraint in response to the US hostage crisis in Iran. In some respects, it is a shame that the author does not link his research on Reagan's policy towards terrorism more explicitly to

⁴ For example, Eric Hooglund, "Reagan's Iran: Factions behind US Policy in the Gulf," *Middle East Report* 151 (1988): 28-31.

⁵ Robert C. McFarlane and Zofia Smardz, *Special Trust* (University of Michigan Press, 1994), 271.

⁶ David Wills, *The First War on Terrorism: Counter Terrorism Policy During the Reagan Administration* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 28. Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2005), 204.

⁷ See Christian Emery, *US Foreign Policy and the Iranian Revolution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), chapter 6.

the origins of Iran-Contra. We know from Malcolm Byrne's research that a secret study on 21 July 1981 (a period that is discussed at some length in this article), had concluded that the US should try to funnel arms to Iran to keep it from falling into the Soviet orbit.⁸

Cold War concerns might help to explain why the Reagan administration ruled out attacking Iran, but surely a less risky, but still politically satisfying response, would be to strike Hezbollah facilities inside Lebanon? Early in the article, we are also told that Washington considered Syria complicit in the attacks against the Marines, so strikes against the Assad regime were also presumably considered. So why were these options ruled out? Cummins's answer focusses on US concerns about its relations with the Arab world, and fears that retaliation against Hezbollah (or indeed Iran) might create blow-back for the United States' regional allies. Washington was in the process of implementing a strategic pivot towards the Persian Gulf, another Cold War policy it had inherited from the Carter administration in the wake of both the Iranian Revolution and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.⁹ Such an ambitious strategy needed the support of the moderate Arab states, who would host American troops and provide the necessary logistical and political support for the US to be able to project power into the Persian Gulf. The leaders in these states were mostly lukewarm at best about playing this role, keenly aware that their acquiescence with a heavy America presence in the region would be deeply unpopular amongst their domestic populations.

These were anxious times for leaders in the Middle East. Sectarian wars raged in Lebanon and between Iran and Iraq, with the direct or indirect involvement of many other regional powers. Anwar el-Sadat, the third President of Egypt, had been assassinated in 1981 by members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad. The Gulf region was in recession in 1982, a consequence of falling demand for oil, the Iran-Iraq war, and a stock market crash in Kuwait. Jordan's economy was a disaster zone. The 1979 Qatif Uprising had left the Saudi authorities paranoid about the Kingdom's restless and marginalized Shia population acting as an Iranian "fifth column." This led to waves of repression and protest in the Eastern Province throughout the early 1980s.

US perceptions of this instability, and the sense of vulnerability it engendered in the United States' Arab allies, are central to Cummins's explanation for the lack of US military action against Iran, Syria, or Hezbollah.¹⁰ US officials were worried that strikes would spark domestic unrest or that radical Shia groups would retaliate against US allies in the region. US leaders also believed that attacking Syria would be unpopular in the Arab world and thus make it harder for Arab leaders to visibly strengthen their security relations with America. Cummins points to one CIA assessment, in November 1983, that concluded that should strikes against Lebanese territory under Syrian control result in a Syrian-American confrontation, the anticipation was that the Saudis would "reluctantly support Syria publicly and financially" (346).

One mild criticism I have is that Cummins does not fully capture the significance of these regional dynamics or provide an evaluation of the America's military posture at this point of the Cold War. It is worth remembering that in 1983, America's credibility as a security guarantor looked decidedly shaky. Four years

⁸ Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 33.

⁹ For other work on this see William E. Odom, "The Cold War Origins of the US Central Command," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8:2 (2006): 52-82; Olav Njølstad, "Shifting Priorities: The Persian Gulf in US Strategic Planning in the Carter Years," *Cold War History* 4:3 (2004): 21-55.

¹⁰ Cummins aligns his approach to recent research showing how the Cold War shaped US policy towards Syria during its intervention in the Lebanese civil war. See Magnus Seland Andersson and Hilde Henriksen Waage, "Stew in Their Own Juice: Reagan, Syria and Lebanon, 1981-1984," *Diplomatic History* 44:4 (2020): 664-691. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhaa036>

earlier, Washington had failed to protect its most important ally in the Persian Gulf, the Shah of Iran. It then endured a humiliating 444-day hostage crisis at the hands of Ayatollah Khomeini's new regime. The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan, in December 1979, led Washington to threaten Moscow with direct military action if Soviet leaders made any move towards the Persian Gulf, ending the reliance on regional powers to protect Western interests. Three years of brutal war between Iran and Iraq had crippled the regional economy and fueled Saudi suspicions about a rising Shia crescent that extended to the Kingdom's own restful and marginalized Shia population. Washington was officially neutral but increasingly under pressure from its Arab allies to help reverse recent Iranian gains. Meanwhile, the death of 241 Marines increased Congressional pressure for an American withdrawal from Lebanon, which Reagan ordered four months later. In 1983, Washington's pivot to the Persian Gulf remained mostly a paper tiger; the US did not yet possess the capabilities required to rapidly project the kind of force required to stop a Soviet push towards warm water ports to the south.

Cummins's article makes an interesting contribution to the literature by demonstrating a high degree of continuity between the Carter and Reagan administrations' view of Iran. For all the criticism Reagan had levelled towards Carter for his weak and ineffectual response to the hostage crisis, his administration heeded the parting advice of Carter's administration that that military threats would "make an eventual rapprochement with Iran more difficult" (338). In the end, the damage the Iranian Revolution inflicted on America's Cold War strategy in the Middle East had the paradoxical effect of making US officials preoccupied with the Iran's security and begrudgingly impressed with Khomeini's anti-Communist credentials. To stress this point, Cummins devotes a decent chunk of his article to discussing US assessments of the Soviet threat in Iran and Khomeini's suppression of Iranian leftists. Cummins also compares the absence of retribution after the 1983 attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut with Carter's reluctance to retaliate against Iran during the 1979–81 hostage crisis. Cold War concerns drove a policy of restraint in both cases, although Carter did eventually launch an ill-fated rescue mission. Cummins argues that the fact that Reagan did not consider military action of any kind is evidence of his administration's even more fervent anti-Communism.

Most scholars accept the argument that the Reagan administration pursued a more muscular ideological approach, at least rhetorically, to confronting the Soviet Union.¹¹ But I would make two points regarding Cummins's comparison. Firstly, it should not be forgotten that the Reagan administration was implementing a strategic pivot to the Persian Gulf that had been conceived and announced in the Carter Doctrine. This was one of the most ideologically motivated grand strategies in post-war US foreign policy, one that we know was based on a misreading of Soviet motives for invading Afghanistan and a hyperbolic assessment of the Soviet threat in Iran specifically and the Persian Gulf in general.

Second, we should not underestimate the vastly different domestic political environments in which the two administrations were operating. Carter resisted military options against Iran until it became an existential threat to his re-election prospects. Had Carter not been in such a desperate political position, it is far less

¹¹ This assertion should not be taken to mean that there is scholarly consensus on the extent that ideology contributed to Reagan's managerial style and decision making. But most scholars accept that US foreign policy took an 'ideological turn' in 1981 that resulted in a more antagonistic policy towards the Soviet Union in the first Reagan administration. For a good survey of this debate see Alan Dobson "Ronald Reagan's Strategies and Policies: Of Ideology, Pragmatism, Loyalties, and Management Style", *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 27:4 (2016), 746-765, DOI: 10.1080/09592296.2016.1238705. Also, James M. Scott. "Reagan's Doctrine? The Formulation of an American Foreign Policy Strategy." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (1996): 1047–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27551670>.

likely he would have authorized such a catastrophically ill-advised military operation.¹² Reagan was also getting into election mode in late 1983, and it is true that his approval rate had plummeted to thirty-five percent at the start of the year.¹³ But by the time of the attacks in Beirut, the economy was recovering, and the numbers had improved to a position where favorable opinions of Reagan's presidency comfortably outweighed unfavorable ones.¹⁴ More importantly, none of the potential Democratic candidates looked a plausible contender for the White House. A year later, Reagan won one of the biggest landslides in American electoral history. Perhaps this provides a basic, but nonetheless convincing, explanation for a policy of restraint. Reagan simply had the political space to do nothing.

Cummins's general thesis is plausible, but it rests quite considerably on the absence of other plausible explanations. Documents that prove the article's main conclusions are relatively thin—for example, just one CIA assessment is meant to establish US perceptions of regional attitudes towards retaliation. One wonders if there is more archival evidence of lobbying by America's regional allies, which outlined their concerns about potential US strikes?¹⁵ There is a paucity of primary sources on the internal discussions about how to respond to the attacks against the Marines. The article draws on a decent range of sources to explain the policy context before the attacks in November 1983, particularly in relation to US assessments of regional instability in the Middle East. As noted, the author provides some compelling evidence to show that it was Weinberger who engineered the blocking of military retaliation, although this is already widely known.¹⁶ There is no "smoking gun" in the form of a contemporary document that explicitly links the policy of restraint to a desire to preserve the chances of a future US-Iranian rapprochement, or the wider Cold War strategic imperatives described in the article. Cummins does cite a National Security Planning Group meeting where McFarlane talked about avoiding actions that might rule out a future rapprochement with Iran, but that was before the attack on the barracks in Lebanon. Surely the death of 241 Marines a few days later changed the policy landscape?

A strong case can be made that Weinberger was correct in his view that one-off retaliatory strikes would achieve very little. It is also true that some US officials and intelligence analysts were concerned that retribution might create problems for America's regional allies.¹⁷ But were these concerns critical factors in the policy of restraint? There are reasons to be skeptical of this claim. Why would attacking Iranian-backed forces in Lebanon threaten the fundamental stability of the Iranian regime? And surely Khomeini could be expected to suppress the Communists regardless of US retaliation given that he obviously was not doing so in order to curry favor with Washington. And, as the article notes, the left had been successfully suppressed by November 1983.

Cummins cites PBS interviews with Robert McFarlane and former State Department coordinator for counter-terrorism, Robert Oakley, to support the general argument regarding strategic concerns in Iran. In those

¹² Richard C. Thornton, *The Carter Years: Toward a New Global Order*, (Paragon House, 2008), 497. Steve Smith, "Policy Preferences and Bureaucratic Position: The Case of the American Hostage Rescue Mission." *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 61:1 (1984): 9–25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2619777>.

¹³ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/ronald-reagan-public-approval>

¹⁴ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/ronald-reagan-public-approval>

¹⁵ One also wonders if the author made any attempt to interview former US officials in the Reagan administration, accepting that virtually all of the leading figures are no longer with us.

¹⁶ Hooglund, "Reagan's Iran", 28-31. McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, 271.

¹⁷ "Interview: Robert Oakley," *PBS Frontline*, 2001, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/oakley.html>

interviews, however, McFarlane's explanation for why the US did not retaliate is slightly different.¹⁸ He first says that the US did not hit Syria for fear of harming relations with other Arab states. But McFarlane then says that the US did not hit Iran because US officials were unsure of Iran's culpability and could not prove it in a way that could justify major retaliation. Contrary to the author's claim that US leaders saw a value in preserving Khomeini's regime, McFarlane's recollection is that his team considered removing Khomeini but concluded that this would take all out invasion, which would not be supported domestically. He suggests that the Reagan administration then looked at options for replacing him more covertly, which led in part to Iran-Contra.

Oakley also states that the primary reason for not retaliating against the Iranians is lack of evidence:

There was a lot of consideration given to bombing the...headquarters of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. That indeed was where these things were being planned operationally, and from where the Iranian Revolutionary Guard was working with the Hezbollah organization to provide them with the advice and the military equipment and the training to conduct the bombings and the hostage-takings. But the decision was made that there wasn't a clear target, there wasn't a clear explanation, and so we shouldn't go ahead.¹⁹

Oakley does suggest that the Reagan administration was concerned about Arab allies opposing US retaliation on the grounds that it might provoke an Iranian backlash in their countries. But this argument sits rather uncomfortably with the wider assessment that US policy was being driven by a desire to preserving Iran as a bulwark to Communism. Rather, the assessment seems to be that the situation in Iran benefited the Soviet Union by de-stabilizing pro-US Arab states. It also seems odd that the Arab states, which were so broadly aligned with the US, would be worried that the prospect of US military strikes provoking Iranian retaliation. Since most of these states were bankrolling Iraq's war against Iran, it therefore seems that they had quite a high tolerance for angering the Iranians.

So to sum up, Cummins's research shows that Weinberger's policy of restraint prevailed. It does a good job of showing how this view was rooted in Cold War strategic planning and, ultimately, in the ongoing fallout from the Iranian Revolution. It helps us to better understand the Pentagon's view on Iran's strategic importance and, by extension, the challenges facing the Reagan administration's military strategy in the Persian Gulf.

Left unexplored is the question of why Weinberger's argument won the day, given that it ran contrary to Reagan's instincts (and indeed directions) and that it faced opposition from high-ranking officials such as Shultz and McFarlane. Was Weinberger able to convince senior military figures that small-scale military operations were ultimately futile and should be opposed on principle? Reagan himself appears as a rather remote and elusive character in the article; he appears to have unambiguously approved the idea of a joint military strike with the French, and, according to McFarlane, was disappointed that it had not occurred.²⁰ But why did the Reagan not intervene and override Weinberger? All we get by way of an explanation is a quotation from another scholar, David Wills, to the effect that Reagan just did not like to admonish his officials. More research of the bureaucratic politics involved in this policy is needed. Cummins does not weigh in on whether US inaction emboldened both Iran and Hezbollah, which this was clearly Macfarlane's

¹⁸ "Interview: Robert McFarlane," *PBS Frontline*, 2001, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/interviews/mcfarlane.html>.

¹⁹ "Interview: Robert Oakley," *PBS Frontline*.

²⁰ McFarlane and Smardz, *Special Trust*, 271.

view. It is thus unclear if the argument here is that Reagan's prioritizing of wider strategic goals was understandable in the context of that moment of the Cold War.

In hindsight, we can see that the Israeli-Egyptian peace accords in 1979 significantly reduced the chances of the Middle East becoming a site for superpower conflict. The Camp David agreement, which was brokered by the Carter administration, ended the threat of a major interstate Arab-Israeli war, the last of which, in 1973, had led to a DEFCON 3 alert after CIA reports indicated that the Soviet Union had sent a ship to Egypt carrying nuclear weapons.²¹ The Arab-Israeli conflict remained extremely violent, but the violence increasingly involved between Israel and militant non-state actors, backed principally by Iran, Syria, and Libya. Lebanon became the focus of this proxy war throughout the 1980s. It also represented the increasingly sectarian characteristics of the violence, fueled not just by the inherently sectarian nature of Lebanese politics, but by the Iran-Iraq War and fears about Iran's attempt to export its Shia Islamic Revolution across the Sunni Arab world.

My own sense of US foreign policy in the Middle East in 1983 was that it was being pulled in two directions. The early 1980s was one of the most dangerous phases of the Cold War, and this heightened longstanding concerns about the Soviet threat to the strategically vital Persian Gulf. Yet the main threats to regional security were local rivalries, which were increasingly sectarian in nature, and the political instability caused by the region's entrenched authoritarianism and economic inequality. In other words, this involved dynamics largely outside the Cold War. The 1980s also saw the continuing decline of socialist and leftist ideology in the Middle East, both in terms of the economic policies of the Soviet Union's remaining Arab allies, but also the political orientation of militant groups who opposed Israel, the United States, and the Soviet Union. Amidst a general rise in religious activity within the region in the 1980s, radical Islam was becoming the most potent platform for resistance.²²

With very few American targets available for terrorists to target in the Middle East, the inescapable fact is that Shia terrorist groups and their state backers would retaliate against Washington's regional allies should they be attacked by American forces. At a time when the US wanted to present itself as a security guarantor, it risked provoking further instability without providing any realistic solutions to the security concerns of its regional allies. Cummins's article shows how this tension played out as the US searched for ways to respond to terrorist violence. It would not be until 1987, when the US inserted its naval forces into the Gulf to protect international shipping against Iranian attacks, that Washington started to actively play the role of regional policeman that it had announced seven years earlier.²³

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²¹ Asaf Siniver, "Introduction" in Asaf Siniver, ed., *The Yom Kippur War: Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 1-13. Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, The Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Paul Thomas Chamberlin, "The Cold War in the Middle East" in Artemy Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Cold War*, 187-201. (Routledge, 2014), 172-175.

²² For the rise of radical Islam see Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2002). For the decline of Arab socialism see Abdel Razzaq Takriti and Hicham Safieddine in "Arab Socialism", in M. Van der Linden (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of Socialism* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 510-513.

²³ America's involvement in the so called "tanker war" involved reflagging Kuwaiti tankers, making them eligible for US Navy escorts as they travelled to and from neutral Gulf countries.

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