

### 3

## The War That Got Away

Let's face it, Sharon was just waiting for an incident to move across that border. He had already repositioned a lot of troops as part of his long-standing plan of how to solve the Palestinian question.

*Philip Habib*

Phil Habib was in Florida to play golf in late April 1981 when he got a phone call from his old friend General Alexander Haig. They went back twenty years together to the time Haig, then a rising star in the Pentagon, visited South Korea during Habib's first tour there. When both were posted to Vietnam in 1966 or '67 they sometimes went out for greasy hamburgers together late at night in Saigon. They worked together some during the Paris Peace Talks when Haig was Kissinger's military adviser. And Haig had spent the night in Habib's residence during a swing through Asia while Habib was ambassador to Korea.

Now Habib was a has-been and Haig had just become secretary of state for the new president, Ronald Reagan. Haig was calling about the new administration's first foreign policy crisis: A war was brewing in the Middle East, and he wanted Habib to go try to avert it. Haig had always been impressed with "the agility and the ability of the guy. He's just as bright as hell, full of energy, and able to handle tough ones."

This would be a tough one. Few assignments would seem less appropriate for a man with Phil Habib's heart condition than trying to avert a looming war in the Middle East. But Habib leaped at the chance to get back in the big leagues. He did check first with his cardiologist. Dr. Cheitlin by now knew him well enough to know that pacing the cage of retirement would do a man like this at least as much harm as the mission, so he told him to go ahead.

This crisis would turn out to be only act one of a tragedy that would play out over the next two years and would echo loud over the next twenty. Making sense of it all requires a bit of background.

### **How the Arena Was Created**

None of the national borders in the Middle East is over a hundred years old. Most of the region was part of the vast Turkish Ottoman Empire until the end of World War One. The Turks had made the fatal mistake of siding with

Germany in that war, after which the victorious French and British carved up the Turks' empire into the countries we know today. They generally drew the border lines arbitrarily, with little regard for who identified with (or hated) whom locally. So there is ample room for disputing the legitimacy of any border that one dislikes.

The French took control of the area now known as Syria and Lebanon. Most people in that area were Muslim. France, a largely Roman Catholic country, had for four-hundred years been the designated protectors of Christians within the Ottoman Empire. Now that they controlled this part of it, they were in a position to give special protection to their protégés, the local equivalent of Roman Catholics, called Maronites. The Maronites and other Christians were concentrated in an enclave in Mount Lebanon, the mountain range east of Beirut. Rather than turn the land they possessed into a single overwhelmingly Muslim nation with a tiny Christian minority, the French in 1920 partitioned it to create two new nations: Syria (mostly Muslim) and Lebanon (mostly Christian). The Christian enclave was too small to be economically viable as an independent nation, though, so the French included just enough Muslim-filled surrounding lands to leave the Christians with a slight majority. Thus was created the modern state of Lebanon.

The land within those new borders had for centuries been a patchwork of turfs ruled by rival clans divided nominally along (and within) religious lines: Maronite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Sunni Muslim, Shi'a Muslim, Druze, and others. Those clans were not about to join hands just because some Europeans had drawn lines on a map. Nor did the Syrians accept the idea that Lebanon was really a separate nation. So, while Lebanon worked at functioning as a putative nation, it did not really jell into a strong, cohesive whole. To a significant extent, having a national government just gave the clans something else to fight for control over. And Syria never came to view Lebanon as much more than its own front yard.

Around the same time that the French were creating Lebanon, the British were creating Palestine just to the south. Over the millennia, Jews, Arabs, Turks, Romans, Christians, and others had alternated controlling that land. In 1948 immigrant Jews declared the modern state of Israel on most of it as a homeland for Jews. In the War of Independence that followed, many of the Palestinian Arabs who had been living there became refugees; of those, many settled in Lebanon and Jordan.

The emergence of the modern state of Israel and displacement of the Palestinians who had been on that land set in motion the fundamental dispute that has roiled the Middle East ever since: Who is entitled to control the land on which the state of Israel sits? And if neither Israelis nor Palestinians can control all of it, how shall they go about sharing it?

After Israel humiliated the Arab states and took control of more land in

## *The War That Got Away*

the Six Day War of 1967, the Palestine Liberation Organization, or PLO, emerged as the leader of Palestinian efforts to win back that land—all of it. Israelis of course recognized the PLO's efforts as a mortal threat to their very existence. Being weak, the PLO resorted to the weapon of the weak, terrorism, to afflict Israelis at every opportunity. The PLO is an umbrella for a wide assortment of factions. Yasir Arafat headed the largest faction. He thus became chairman of the PLO as a whole and, in Israel's eyes, the personification of terrorism.

In the late 1960s the PLO struck at Israel from both Lebanon and Jordan, but its main base of operations was Jordan. Its rocket attacks and raids inevitably drew retaliation from Israel. Jordan's King Hussein did not need such problems, so in time he forbade the PLO to use Jordanian soil to launch any more attacks on Israel. The PLO responded by trying to assassinate him and take over his country. After a bloody struggle, culminating in "Black September" 1970, he finally managed to drive them out of Jordan. Those 20,000 or so PLO fighters therefore washed up in Lebanon, the only country in the region too weak to keep them out. The PLO already had a "state within a state" in Lebanon. The influx of comrades from Jordan intensified PLO control of southern Lebanon, concentrated the PLO leadership in Beirut, and increased their presence in the rest of the country.

### **The Old Antagonisms**

By this time the Lebanese had had fifty years to develop a working modern government. The one they developed was hobbled by structural defects, but it limped along well enough to get by. Lebanon—thanks not to the strength of its government, but to ancient traditions and the exceptional talents of its entrepreneurial people—was the crossroads of East-West commerce. Their Phoenician forebears had, after all, invented bookkeeping and money in the modern sense. The story goes that, when asked by his teacher, "How much is two and two?" a Lebanese schoolboy supposedly replied, "Am I buying or selling?" No matter how much one clan might hate their next-door neighbors, they were not going to let that interfere with making money. So, while ancient antagonisms simmered beneath the surface, the Lebanon of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s seemed like an oasis of tolerance, a "Switzerland of the Middle East." Its glamorous, vibrant capital, Beirut, was considered "the Paris of the Middle East." In the mid-'60s *Sports Illustrated* and *Reader's Digest* respectively dubbed Beirut "the new star of Mediterranean tourism" and "the world's most exciting city." Besides having more restaurants per capita than Paris, it had more banks per capita than Berne, making Beirut the leading banker to the Arab world. The American University of Beirut was the premier seat of learning in the Arab world, and its renowned hospital trained the region's leading doctors. Sophisticates, investors, smugglers,

spies, sheiks, and tourists crowded the city for the shopping, the gambling, the dancing, the horse racing, the water skiing, the fine dining. Champagne glasses clinked under crystal chandeliers. All seemed well.

Seemed. The new flood of PLO fighters—on top of the influx of at least 200,000 Palestinian refugees since 1948—shattered Lebanon's fragile equilibrium. On April 13, 1975, Palestinians tried to assassinate the patriarch of the strongest Maronite clan, Pierre Gemayel. His militia retaliated against a busload of Palestinians. The tit for tat quickly mushroomed into a free-for-all civil war of everybody against everybody. All of the old antagonisms quickly bubbled back up to the surface. Party A would ally with Party B to fight Party C—until A inevitably betrayed B, at which point B and C would ally to fight A. But the core fight remained Maronite versus PLO. As far as the Maronites were concerned, Lebanon was supposed to have been the land of the Maronites, and here the newcomer PLO was ruining everything.

Beirut was really two cities. West Beirut was the generally Muslim half, East Beirut the generally Christian half. The Maronites had long dominated East Beirut. By the mid-1970s, the PLO had turned West Beirut into its headquarters. The civil war formalized that division, with a booby-trapped no-man's land called the Green Line separating East from West. At only three points along the Green Line could anyone cross—if, that is, one were willing to risk getting shot for having set foot on the wrong side of town. Bullets and rocket-propelled grenades crossed the Green Line freely and routinely.

The government, meanwhile, could only wring its hands as the country exploded in street battles, car bombings, sniping, assassinations, and massacres. The waning power of the government evaporated as the army split along religious lines. So in 1976 the helpless Lebanese president invited the Syrian military to come try to quell the anarchy. The US facilitated the arrangement. Henry Kissinger brokered an informal understanding whereby Israel assented to this Syrian mission in Lebanon as long as the Syrians came no closer to Israel than a certain "red line." The Syrians did respect that line. And by the end of 1976 their brutal methods did succeed in putting a lid on the violence.

But then they stayed. The civil war had not entirely died down, and they considered Lebanon an estranged province of Syria anyway. So they never saw any reason to go home. Indeed, they started drawing up plans to install a puppet government in Beirut. By overstaying their welcome to the point of irritation and then anger and then rage, the Syrians inspired violent designs to drive them out.

Meanwhile the PLO continued harassing Israel with rockets and terror attacks launched from southern Lebanon. In the absence of an effective Lebanese government able to restrain the PLO, the Israelis felt entitled to

## *The War That Got Away*

do that job themselves in Lebanon on their side of the red line.

The Jews in Israel and the Maronites in Lebanon had at least three things in common: a determination to survive in the midst of enemies, a mutual enemy in the PLO, and a desire to dislodge the Syrians from Lebanon. The heart of Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin, a Holocaust survivor with a romance for the righteous quest, went out to the Maronites as a persecuted minority—never mind the history of atrocities they had committed against their rivals and against one another. Begin loved the idea of Jews protecting Christians. So in December 1980 Bashir Gemayel, Pierre's most ambitious son, cemented an alliance with Israel. There was no way his family's militia, called the Phalange, could whip the Syrian army. But the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) certainly could. Emboldened by his alliance, Bashir promptly started picking fights with the Syrians in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

Bashir went too far, the Syrians felt, when he started building a road to connect the Maronite heartland in Mount Lebanon with the valley's main Christian town, Zahle. The Syrians considered Zahle a strategic part of their turf, and they considered that road a serious threat: a preparation for an Israeli-supported Phalange push into their turf. In April 1981 the Syrians started helicoptering troops into position to block the progress of that road and confront Bashir's militia. On April 28 Begin vowed not to allow Syria to "perpetrate genocide in Lebanon." The same day the Israeli Cabinet voted to authorize a limited attack on the helicopters—but then kept debating the issue. As soon as the vote was taken, though, the chief of staff left the Cabinet room to issue orders to the air force. The Cabinet ministers were still arguing about whether an attack was a good idea when the chief of staff returned to report that the mission was already accomplished: Israeli jets had just shot down two of those helicopters.

The next day Syria responded by moving surface-to-air missiles near Zahle, poised to shoot down Israeli jets. Begin responded by threatening to destroy the missiles.

### **Informal Understanding**

This was the point at which Al Haig phoned Phil Habib.

News that Habib would be coming to try to work out a settlement reached Israel on April 30, soon after the Israeli Cabinet had authorized an attack to destroy the missiles. Bad weather had scrubbed the attack. When Begin heard that an American special envoy would be coming, he suspended the attack order indefinitely.

Back in the saddle, Habib positively vibrated with a new sense of purpose. He arrived in the Middle East May 5, 1981, and immediately started putting in twenty-two-hour days zipping back and forth between Jerusalem, Damascus, Beirut, and other capitals in the region.

Neither Begin nor Syrian president Hafaz al-Assad had really intended to get into a war with each other, so both welcomed the diplomatic out that Habib represented. “For several weeks, Habib played the role of an excuse for Begin not to bomb the missile sites,” says US ambassador to Israel Samuel Lewis. Begin’s initial aggressiveness soon gave way to a cooler realization that he did not need the war with Syria that bombing the missiles would likely spark. “Begin clutched Habib like a life-line,” Lewis says, because “after having made such a public commitment to remove the missiles, it was very tough” for Begin to back down without losing face. While both Israel and Syria continued to huff and puff, both held fire to give Habib time to piece together a settlement.

The settlement he worked out was an informal understanding that the Syrians would not fire the missiles and the Israelis would not destroy the missiles. Israeli jets could continue to fly in Lebanon, and the Syrian missiles could continue to stand still in Lebanon. The would-be war between Israel and Syria was called off.

The would-be war between Israel and the PLO was not. The PLO had continued its sporadic rocket attacks on northern Israel. In late May and then again on July 10, Israel stepped up its bombing of PLO positions in southern Lebanon. The PLO held back but finally responded with an unprecedented two-week barrage. They had hit those northern towns many times before, but never to this extent, for this long, or to this effect. Israelis realized that they had no good defense against Katyusha rockets. A Katyusha launcher is small enough to mount in the back of a truck: You just shoot off a few rockets, cover it back up with a tarp, drive away, and by the time Israeli jets arrive it’s miles away hidden in a garage ready for next time. Katyushas have a range of about eight miles. The rockets can be targeted precisely, but the PLO apparently didn’t bother: Hitting here and there randomly around a general area seemed to instill more terror than precise hits at any particular target. Though few shells or rockets in this barrage did appreciable damage, the “War of the Katyushas” paralyzed northern Israel with fear, sent tens of thousands of Israelis into bomb shelters or fleeing south, and stunned the government. The Israeli Air Force pounded PLO positions in Lebanon, including Palestinian sections of Beirut, even harder. The body count reached five-hundred in Lebanon, five in Israel. But still the rockets came.

So when Habib met with him on July 24, Begin was ready for a truce.

And Habib had one in his pocket. The deal he had worked out in all his shuttling was another informal understanding, this time that the Israelis and PLO would each refrain from shooting and back away from the brink. As with the Syria-Israel deal, the terms of the PLO-Israel understanding were written down, but there was no common piece of paper bearing everyone’s

## *The War That Got Away*

signatures. The PLO and the Israelis each just agreed separately with Philip Habib about what would and would not happen. The War of the Katyushas stopped. Everybody breathed a huge sigh of relief.

### **Ten Times What Must Be Done**

Well, not everybody. One of Begin's Cabinet ministers, retired general Ariel Sharon, strenuously objected to Habib's ceasefire. He was extremely dissatisfied with the way Habib's deal had left matters hanging. It did not solve the underlying problem, Sharon argued: The PLO's whole *raison d'être* was still to harass and ultimately destroy Israel. Agreeing to this ceasefire would prevent Israel from bombing the PLO in Lebanon without preventing the PLO from striking Jews in ways not addressed by Habib's deal.

And he was right. The deal *did* have holes. It was a stop-gap ceasefire designed to let everyone save face and thus defuse an immediate crisis, not an elegantly crafted treaty designed to satisfy anyone long term. It left the Syrian missiles in place. It left the PLO's rocket launchers in place. It left the Israeli jets free to keep flying over parts of Lebanon. It left all three parties free to build up their arsenals. All the ceasefire did, really, was to coordinate agreement from the Syrians, the PLO, and the Israelis not to shoot. But Habib felt it would be absurd to let the bombs and rockets keep falling until the underlying problems got solved—which in this case would be never. The whole idea was just to stop the killing and let tempers cool so that the diplomats could then go to work devising more stable long-term arrangements.

Sharon was particularly galled that Begin had, for all practical purposes, made a bargain with the PLO. The Israelis had insisted that neither they nor the Americans must ever talk to or reach any kind of agreement with the PLO, since that would be rewarding terrorism. Indeed, in negotiating the deal, Habib had been forbidden by US policy to talk directly with the PLO and thus had to work through Saudi intermediaries. But a deal reached indirectly was still a deal, and Sharon was anxious to bury this one.

Ariel Sharon, nicknamed Arik, was a genuine hero in Israel. Many Israelis revered him as a "living symbol of unrelenting dedication to Israel's national survival." He had fought in each of Israel's wars since 1948 and had proven himself a brilliant soldier. He came of age as one of the "generation of giants," the soldier-politicians like Moshe Dayan and Yitzhak Rabin who were heroes of Israel's first fifty years. In the 1967 war he commanded the legendary armored division that captured the Sinai. In the 1973 war he led Israel's badly outgunned armored divisions to victory, again in the Sinai, with a brilliant crossing of the Suez Canal. He earned a reputation for initiative and fearlessness.

But he also earned a reputation among Israelis who worked with him

as a loose cannon, reckless, duplicitous, untrustworthy, and prone to insubordination, inordinate zeal, excessive force, and indifference to life. Many Israelis viewed him as, in one writer's words, an "ultra-hawk with tendencies toward extreme action." In time he would make a powerful—and overwhelmingly negative—impression on American diplomats. Undersecretary Lawrence Eagleburger was among the more restrained in describing Sharon as a "bull in the china shop" and a "rogue elephant" who "would hear what he wanted to hear."

After trading in his soldier's uniform for a politician's suit, Sharon joined Begin's Cabinet as minister of agriculture. That post might seem like a backwater for a retired general. But having a seat in the Cabinet gave him a forum to argue for his hardline military views and, as one writer puts it, he "routinely invoked security to justify whatever he wanted to do." A master at creating facts on the ground that others could not easily undo, Sharon engineered an aggressive program of founding Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which Israel had captured in the 1967 war and occupied ever since. Those settlements were intended to colonize land that had been Palestinian with a permanent Israeli civilian and—not coincidentally—military presence.

When Ezer Weizman resigned as Begin's defense minister in April 1980, Sharon was the prime candidate to replace him. But Begin and his advisers mistrusted Sharon's political judgment and were, as Israeli journalists Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari put it, "appalled by the idea of concentrating such sensitive powers in Sharon's hands." An academic commented, "Begin will do what must be done; Sharon will do ten times what must be done." Former prime minister Golda Meir had reportedly once said, "If Arik gets near the ministry of defense, I picket that office myself." So, rather than entrust the army to Sharon, Begin chose to double as defense minister himself.

But Begin's Likud Party nearly lost the June 1981 elections. Polls in the final week showed Likud trailing the Labor Party. In the last two days before the election, though, Likud gained four parliament seats that polls had predicted would go to Labor. That gave Likud a majority of one seat. Ambassador Lewis says, "Arik controlled three Likud votes—his own and two others. He threatened Begin that if he did not become Defense Minister, he and his two friends would 'take a walk' and make the Likud a minority party. That forced Begin to give Sharon the Defense Ministry."

So a week or two after Habib's July 24 ceasefire was reached, Arik Sharon finally became Israel's defense minister.

Whereas Habib had been looking beyond the ceasefire to the more stable long-term diplomatic arrangements he recognized were needed, Sharon was finally in the position to look beyond the ceasefire to the war that he felt was needed.

**Only in Force**

Once he got the July 24 ceasefire wrapped up, Philip Habib came home, his mission complete. That mission had made him one of the most famous diplomats in the world, but the follow-up diplomacy would be a job for others. "I am retired," he said in August. "I play golf for a living."

By fall 1981, though, the situation in Lebanon had neither worsened nor improved significantly, and Begin was anxious to have him return. Begin "had a lot of confidence in Phil," says Lewis, "because he had skillfully helped Begin get out of the box he'd gotten into over the missiles."

So he returned to the region in early December, along with his deputy, Morris Draper. Whereas Habib had spent most of his Foreign Service career dealing with Asia, Draper had spent most of his dealing with the Middle East. He had narrowly escaped from Baghdad on the day of the 1958 Iraqi coup. He had learned Arabic in Beirut in 1959. As political officer in Jordan in 1970, he had been taken hostage for a few days by George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. While Kissinger was secretary of state, Draper was his special assistant for certain Middle Eastern issues. His title now was deputy assistant secretary for Near Eastern Affairs—"Mr. Lebanon."

On this December trip, Habib and Draper's most important meeting was with Sharon. Unlike Begin, Sharon was not happy to see the American diplomats back.

Ariel Sharon did not believe in diplomacy. He believed in force, and only in force. Diplomacy had accomplished little for Israel, in his view. Israel's gains in the thirty-five years since its founding had come from its armed forces kicking ass. And he saw himself as the greatest ass kicker of all. Though he made suitable noises supporting Habib's efforts, he considered Habib's plan "hopeless."

Habib's agenda was to promote a formula to strengthen the July 24 ceasefire and arrange a staged withdrawal of PLO weaponry back out of range of the border, along with some concessions by Israel. "We made our presentation and Sharon shat all over it," says Draper. "In the most sarcastic way, he said, in effect, 'You dumb Americans. You've got this little panty-waist idea to separate the PLO and Israeli forces in stages. The realities are this.'"

He then had aides bring him some maps. Pointing to West Beirut, the Beirut-Damascus Highway, and other places deep within Lebanon, Sharon outlined his analysis of the problems there. The Lebanese were scheduled to elect a new president in August 1982, eight months hence. Lebanon needed free elections to bring about a legitimate government strong enough to influence the whole country, associate with the free world, and make peace with Israel. But, Sharon postulated, no such election or government was possible

as long as the PLO was entrenched from Beirut south to the border, the Syrians were entrenched between Beirut east to Zahle, and Syrian missiles were in positions to deter Israeli spy flights.

Though Habib was proud of how carefully all three parties were adhering to the ceasefire, Sharon felt the PLO had violated it already. Though Habib insisted that the Israel-PLO dimension of the ceasefire applied only to actions across the Lebanese-Israeli border and that the border had generally been quiet, Sharon regarded any terrorist attack by anyone on any Jew anywhere in the world as a violation of the ceasefire. Such attacks had occurred within Israel, in Europe, and elsewhere since July 24. Sharon felt that if the PLO “continued to violate” the ceasefire, then Israel would be free to retaliate however it saw fit. He said, “What can be done [is] a swift, fast move . . . which will cause such heavy casualties to the terrorists that they will not stay there as a political or military factor. . . . It would solve it immediately, and 15,000 armed terrorists would not be there afterwards. . . . But that is if you really want to solve the problem.”

### **The Audacity**

There was no mistaking what Sharon meant. “It was quite clear that he would go out and destroy the PLO once and for all, as he put it,” says Draper. “He said, ‘We’re not gonna repeat what we did in ’78,’” referring to Operation Litani, an invasion of Lebanon that Israel aborted midway when President Carter intervened. Gesturing over his map, Sharon made it “quite clear that he would be marching up to the outskirts of Beirut at least and that he would bring all kinds of firepower to bear. He didn’t say ‘go right *into* Beirut,’ but he made it very clear that that’s where the Palestinians were, that’s where the Israelis were going to attack.”

Sharon emphasized that this was all just his own opinion of what should be done and that it did not yet enjoy Cabinet approval. But he also emphasized that he was not just brainstorming on a napkin, telling Habib that “he had instructed his chief of staff to be able to respond at once, if something occurred and Israel was provoked.”

Habib had listened skeptically to lots of generals in Korea and Vietnam spouting their ideas for military solutions to political problems. But he was stupefied by the audacity of the one he was now hearing from Arik Sharon. The two went at it hot and heavy. “General Sharon,” he sputtered, “this is the twentieth century and times have changed. You can’t go around invading countries just like that, spreading destruction and killing civilians. In the end, your invasion will grow into a war with Syria, and the entire region will be engulfed in flames!”

When Sam Lewis described this meeting to the press a few years later, some Israeli officials called for Sharon’s head for having revealed to the

## *The War That Got Away*

United States secret plans for a military operation that Israel's own Cabinet had not even seen. Sharon angrily called Lewis' account "a blatant lie" and denied having revealed any operational details to Habib. But operational details were beside the point. The grand sweep told Habib all he needed to know: that while the PLO and Syrians were maintaining the terms of the ceasefire agreement, Sharon was seriously planning to invade Lebanon as far as Beirut to drive the Syrians back and utterly destroy the PLO. While Sharon may or may not have said explicitly, "We will invade as far as Beirut," he didn't have to. When a general rolls out a map, points at Beirut and other areas deep within Lebanon as the locus of problems, and vows to solve those problems, it requires little imagination to understand where he envisions his troops fighting. Indeed, Habib recalled Sharon describing "a plan for a move into Lebanon to trap Palestinian forces all the way up into the Beirut area."

Why did Sharon tip his hand? Draper believes it was largely because he was "so arrogant. He didn't come to this meeting with plans to lay this out. He lost his temper and decided he would tell us a thing or two. He had nothing but contempt for the United States as a power to be reckoned with. He never disguised that. He is a very cocky guy" who had grown so used to Washington's acquiescence to just about anything Israel did, that he had "absolute disdain" for the United States, to the point of being "anti-American." The US might make obligatory protests and even impose the occasional modest sanction on Israel. But rarely did it do anything to seriously deter the Israelis from whatever they wanted to do. Draper says, "Sharon and many of the people with him didn't think the Americans amounted to anything, that we were not going to oppose anything they wanted."

Schiff and Ya'ari believe Sharon was more calculating. Six months earlier, Israel had bombed a nuclear reactor in Iraq. That was one instance when Washington did protest, delaying a military sale and complaining that the US hadn't been consulted about the strike in advance. The journalists say Sharon was deliberately using "the drip method" with Habib: giving the US a little information now, a little more later, so that when he finally did launch his invasion he couldn't be accused of surprising Washington. Besides, Draper says, if a foreign government tells you in advance of a planned military operation, "you almost become a party to it."

### **West Beirut Is Your Business**

Habib wasted his breath arguing with Sharon about the folly of his invasion plan. Habib was only the travelling representative of Washington. To Sharon's ears, the only American voices that mattered were Haig's and Reagan's. Habib and Draper immediately sounded the alarm to Washington about Sharon's plans, taking care not to say that Begin was involved in the

plan. But Washington, preoccupied with other matters, did nothing about the warning. The 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty called for Israel to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula in April 1982—four months hence—and State did not want any flap with Israel to jeopardize that withdrawal happening on schedule. Besides, Draper says, “It’s hard for Washington to go blasting back at Israel, especially about an idea proposed by one madcap Cabinet minister.” So Washington’s response to Sharon was, as Schiff put it, “feeble.”

After reporting in to State, Habib returned to private life. Over the next several months, he was mostly out of the action, but would come in now and then as required.

Sharon meanwhile pressed ahead with his plans for Lebanon. In January 1982 he flew to Lebanon to scout out the lay of the land that he expected to invade. First stop: Beirut. His host was Bashir Gemayel, the Maronite ally who had sparked the missile crisis in April. This invasion would be a partnership of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and Bashir’s Phalange militia. The IDF would do the large-scale heavy lifting; the Phalange would handle up-close fighting that Begin didn’t want Israeli troops exposed to. Bashir took him to Beit Meri, a suburb in the hills surrounding Beirut, to show him the panoramic view of the city. Sharon pointed to the Muslim side of town, which had become the PLO’s stronghold, and told Bashir, “Israel will not enter West Beirut. . . . Our presence there would cause complex political problems for us. West Beirut is your business. . . .” Though Sharon spoke with Bashir in hypotheticals—“*If* there is a war, take that hill”—there was little ambiguity that they were coordinating plans for an invasion they both knew was just a pretext away.

That evening Bashir brought Sharon home to meet his father Pierre (whose attempted assassination had sparked the civil war in 1975), and former president Camille Chamoun, who had invited in the Syrians in 1976. The men were all keen to have the Israeli army invade Lebanon to kick out the Syrians and Palestinians for them. Chamoun pressed Sharon, “Will you really come to Beirut, as you have said? Or is all this just talk?”

“We’ll get there! Don’t you worry.”

### **Hostage to the Lunatic Fringe**

Sharon’s invasion plans were the worst-kept secret in the Middle East. The consul general in Jerusalem reiterated to Haig in February Habib’s warning that it was coming. Bashir told the American ambassador to Lebanon in the spring that it was coming. The Lebanese ambassador to the UN announced in a speech that it was coming. Journals in February started publishing a stream of articles predicting it. The Israelis moved 25,000 troops near the border, their purpose easy to infer. The PLO laid in provisions in anticipation. American news commentator John Chancellor even broadcast an eerily

## *The War That Got Away*

accurate report of the plans on NBC April 8. The only questions were when and under what pretext Sharon would launch the invasion.

As the winter and spring of 1982 proceeded, Sharon kept waiting for the PLO to hand him his pretext. They didn't. They kept busy stockpiling all the weaponry they could get their hands on—a buildup Sharon repeatedly decried as intolerable—but refrained from shooting it across the border at Israel. "There hadn't been a single incident on the Israeli-Lebanese border" since July 24, Habib said. "Not a single rocket had been fired across that border, no attacks across the border from the day I had negotiated the ceasefire in 1981."

But there had been a number of horrible terrorist incidents against Jews elsewhere in the world. For example, Israeli offices in Athens and Paris were attacked, and an Israeli embassy official was shot in Paris. Begin took the violent death of any Jew personally. As long as he had guns at his disposal, he could not abide letting those deaths go unanswered. True, he had welcomed Habib's prevention of a war the previous summer. But as the months rolled by and the list of terrorist attacks against Jews lengthened, the July 24 ceasefire came to feel more and more to Begin like a straitjacket. It did not prevent terrorists from killing Jews in Europe, but it did prevent Israel from striking back at terrorist bases in Lebanon. Begin and Sharon thus insisted that terror attacks abroad frayed the thread by which the July 24 ceasefire was hanging.

Habib considered it unreasonable for them to try to extend that agreement around the globe. "I said, 'No, that was not the understanding.' I made it very clear that it was attacks *from Lebanon into Israel* that were forbidden." The Israelis had proposed back in the summer that the ceasefire should apply to any terrorist attack on any Jew anywhere in the world, and Habib had batted down the idea. No one deal could possibly hope to solve every aspect of Israel's security problem or protect all Jews worldwide. "We cannot afford to make ourselves hostage to the actions of the . . . lunatic fringe" of the Palestinian movement, Habib told Begin. If all it takes to jeopardize the agreement is one hothead burning a synagogue a thousand miles away, then every hothead out there will be competing for bragging rights to having sunk the deal. Attacks on Jews in France or Brazil were certainly reprehensible, but, Habib argued, they were not covered by this deal.

Five months after showing Habib his maps of Lebanon, Sharon was losing patience. "With the situation between ourselves and the terrorists now just waiting for a spark," Sharon writes, he traveled to Washington in late May "to make sure the United States understood our intentions with total clarity." His fellow general-turned-politician Al Haig would be his most important audience.

## Hunting License

Al Haig was the most fervent supporter of Israel ever to serve as America's secretary of state. He insists that "I'd kick the shit out of Israel tomorrow if that was in the interest of this country," but his colleagues perceived him as an enthusiast who, in the words of one, "did not feel inclined to be critical of [the Israelis] in virtually anything they did." The main reason was Haig's Cold War ideology: Israel was America's client, Syria and the PLO were the Soviets' clients. Supporting Israel and opposing its enemies, then, struck a blow against communism. Moreover, Haig had been briefly considered a candidate for president in 1979 and would indeed mount a campaign in 1988. "There's no question but that Al Haig's presidential ambitions heavily influenced the way he looked at a lot of issues, particularly on the Middle East," says his assistant secretary for the Middle East, Nicholas Veliotes. "We made major missteps . . . because he thought it would play [well politically]." His May 25 meeting with Sharon would prove to be perhaps Haig's greatest single misstep.

There were actually two meetings: nine Americans and twelve Israelis in the secretary's conference room, then Haig and Sharon privately in Haig's office. "I wanted all of the Indians to have exposure to Sharon and his thinking," Haig says. "I put the big meeting on as theater to be sure the dwarfs all knew what we were up against." The dwarfs included Habib, Undersecretary Eagleburger, Veliotes, Ambassador Lewis, and Director of Israel and Arab-Israeli Affairs Charles Hill.

Sharon outlined his by-now familiar grievances against the PLO and complained that Syrian flights in Lebanon were interfering with Israel's latitude to fly reconnaissance and photography missions there. He blamed 250 Jewish casualties, including 25 deaths, on 170 events he considered ceasefire violations since July 24. Though the acts may have occurred in Europe or elsewhere, he claimed that many terrorist organizations around the world were tied to the PLO and that "virtually all terrorist operations originate from Beirut," the PLO's headquarters. Despite such outrages, he said, Israel had shown great restraint. But now he saw no alternative to entering Lebanon to "clean out" terrorist bases, organizations, military structures, and political headquarters. A simple military operation would solve the problem, though "it would be very hard—almost impossible—not to 'touch the Syrians'" in Lebanon. Besides freeing Israel from danger for many years, such an invasion "could turn Lebanon toward the free world and help form a new, friendly government."

Haig prefaced his response by saying he understood Israel's dilemma. He said his earlier impression from Begin was that Israel "intended a substantial, deep, long-lasting attack into Lebanon." More recently, though, he had sensed Begin leaning toward a smaller operation. Now, Sharon seemed

## *The War That Got Away*

to be envisioning the substantial plan.

Sharon denied it. “Our intention is not a large operation,” he replied. “We will try to be as small and efficient as possible.”

“Like a lobotomy,” Haig said.

The declassified record of the meeting gives little indication that Haig viewed an invasion as anything but inevitable. His concerns were how big it would be and what spark would pass muster in international opinion. “The U.S., as an ally, cannot tell Israel not to defend its interests,” Haig said, “but the perception of the world is perhaps as important as the reality. There must be a recognizable provocation. . . . We hope you will be sensitive to the need for a provocation that will be understood internationally, and any reaction must be in proportion to the provocation. We must make every effort to avoid conflict.”

In ministerial-level meetings like this, the principals generally do all the talking. But Habib could not keep quiet. He reminded Sharon that he would soon be back in the region to “improve the prospects for security” diplomatically. Sharon brushed him off: “If anyone is killed tomorrow, we are in Lebanon. Israel cannot live under these threats.” Habib reminded him that Begin recognized the importance that any military response be proportional to the provocation. Sharon disdainfully mentioned Haig’s “clear provocation” formula and said, “How many Jews will it take to make a clear provocation?”

Habib “firmly, loudly and unambiguously opposed Sharon’s agenda,” writes one participant. He particularly argued his own by-now familiar point that the ceasefire did not apply to terrorist attacks against Jews in Europe. Sharon, of course, already knew what Habib thought and hadn’t come to talk to him.

After two hours, Haig took Sharon into his office for what he considered the real meeting. He did not even invite Habib to this private session “so that there could be no question that I was playing to an audience.” He says he gave Sharon the same message again privately.

Sharon’s response was that “No one has the right to tell Israel what decision it should take in defense of its people.” Having earlier volunteered that point himself, Haig conceded it. As legitimate as the right of self-defense may be, though, conceding it in this particular context had the effect of knocking the legs out from under everything cautionary Haig had said. His message became, in effect, *We don’t think you should invade Lebanon, but it’s really up to you to decide that for yourself.*

Much has been made of whether or not Haig gave Sharon a “green light” to proceed with his invasion. Habib thought he did. It wasn’t that he thought Haig *meant* to: It was that he knew Sharon well enough to know what Sharon walked away believing. “The thing with the Israelis is that, if you don’t make your opposition unalterably clear, they will take it for

acquiescence,” says Draper. “If you don’t tell them No! they take it for Yes.” Arik Sharon in particular—whom American diplomats routinely describe as a “bully” and worse—has to be bludgeoned, not cautioned. His course was set long before he described it to Al Haig. The only message with a prayer of getting his attention at this point would have been something along the lines of *Goddammit, the United States is utterly opposed to this reckless venture and will punish Israel severely if you go ahead with it in defiance of your greatest benefactor!*

And that he did not hear. Haig clearly agreed with his basic line of argument, even if not his planned remedy. Sharon went home confident that, while Washington might make noises once he invaded, he would get away with it. And he figured that, in the unlikely event Washington decided to impose some modest penalty in response, he could have the job done before Washington could act.

As soon as the meetings broke up, Habib told Haig, “He thinks he has an OK from us to run an operation into Lebanon.” Several others told him the same. They all urged Haig to send a stern follow-up letter to Begin immediately to impress upon him the depths of America’s opposition. A letter did go out, but it had no punch and had no effect.

Ultimately, Sharon had come to talk, not to listen. And he certainly had not come to seek approval. He came to inform Haig first-hand of what he had in mind so that when he did invade—as he fully intended to do, whether Washington liked it or not—he could say “Washington knew all about this.” Haig’s two stipulations, that the provocation be internationally recognized and the retaliation proportionate, had been given to the Israelis over and over for months. Repeating them now had no more effect than they had had before. Internationally recognized? Sharon was not going to poll world leaders on how bad a provocation was. Proportionate retaliation? *Disproportionate* retaliation was explicit Israeli military policy.

Veliotes interprets the message Sharon heard as “‘Don’t do it unless you have an internationally recognized pretext.’ Horrible thing to say. However Haig intended it, Sharon saw it as a hunting license. Listening to this, Sharon could only conclude that he’d been told, ‘Find yourself a reason and then go at it.’”

### Just Stupid

Al Haig was one of Habib’s two bosses. The other was Ronald Reagan. As a Foreign Service officer, Habib considered it a matter of professionalism to report to the secretary of state. But his status as a special presidential envoy gave him the right and sometimes the responsibility to deal directly with the president.

It had taken Reagan no time at all to “fall wildly in love with Phil

## *The War That Got Away*

Habib,” says Veliotes. Reagan related to people more than to policies, and here was a top pro who was not a product of Harvard or Yale, a guy with rough edges who spoke directly and with a strong Brooklyn accent. Every time Reagan saw him, says Veliotes, he “started breaking out in ethnic jokes and stories. Habib was a very, very important influence on Reagan. Reagan really respected him.”

The president was a simple man who thought in simple terms. He and Habib shared a simple sense of right and wrong. Reagan thought in terms of general objectives more than strategies. The advantage of his style was that Habib always knew what Reagan wanted: for him to keep people from killing one another and to get them talking. That wasn’t terribly sophisticated guidance, but it was clear. It suited Habib fine: Like any skilled diplomat, his attitude was, “Tell me generally what you want me to accomplish, but don’t tell me *how* to do it. That’s up to me. That’s why I’m a diplomat.” Reagan had complete confidence in Phil Habib because he liked him and because Habib came highly recommended and seemed to know what he was doing. That was good enough for Reagan.

The disadvantage to the president’s style was that he had little understanding of the problems Habib was trying to solve. He was sadly misinformed—or simply uninformed—about the facts on the ground and the political realities of the Middle East. He thought Syria’s missiles in Lebanon were aimed at the heart of Israel, that the troubles of Lebanon were stirred up by the Soviets, and that the PLO was an instrument of the Soviets. He read few papers on the subject, preferring instead to have his staff discuss problems with him and give him oversimplified digests. He entertained only a handful of recommendations, stripped of all details, from which to choose. His way of having a serious meeting about the Middle East was to read aloud the talking points prepared for him by his staff on a set of 3x5 cards. Habib found Reagan immensely likeable but a man “who couldn’t remember one detail from one minute to the next.”

So at their first encounter in 1981, Habib set about trying to educate him about the realities of the Middle East. “Starting point in Lebanon: No one wears a white hat,” says Veliotes. “It wasn’t good Christians against bad guys. And *Palestinian* is not synonymous with *terrorist*.”

Habib earned Reagan’s trust also because he knew how to play the bureaucracy. Reagan always had James Baker, Edwin Meese, Michael Deaver, and/or a few of his other closest advisers—“the fellas”—with him. He had known and relied heavily on them for years, and no policy had a chance unless they bought into it. So Habib made sure to include them in his educating process right from the start. By winning their confidence early on, he sealed Reagan’s.

Al Haig had not taken that approach. He felt foreign policy was his business, and he “didn’t want that crowd mucking around in his business—a

suicidal attitude,” says Veliotis. Every US administration has some amount of tension and rivalry between the State Department and the White House’s National Security Council. But rarely does it reach the degree of outright acrimony it reached during Al Haig’s tenure as secretary of state. Reagan concluded that Haig “didn’t even want me as president to be involved in setting foreign policy—he regarded it as his turf.”

Whereas Habib had gone out of his way to cultivate “the fellas” around Reagan, Haig could barely conceal his contempt for them. He railed against Baker (“that son of a bitch is the worst influence I have ever seen in the federal government”), George Bush (“saw me as a threat because he wanted to be president, and he thought *I* wanted to be president”), and above all National Security Adviser William Clark (“didn’t know his ass from third base. How could he?! He never read a book on foreign policy in his life!”). Haig bitterly despised them, and they had no enthusiasm for him. He felt that they were out to do him in, and he was probably right. He had tried early on to exclude them from his dealings with the president, but Reagan knew and trusted them far more than he ever did Haig. His ploy proved suicidal when they began blocking his access to Reagan.

The legitimate policy differences between the secretary of state and the White House were obscured by the personal rancor. Al Haig had little more regard for Ronald Reagan than he had for the fellas. He says, “Reagan was *totally* isolated from reality by the White House staff. He didn’t have his hands on the tiller. In my experience, he usually didn’t know the facts and was not engaged, no matter how serious the problem was. His staying power was zilch.” Haig’s bottom-line assessment of Reagan: “He wasn’t a mean man. He was just stupid.”

### The Spark

Reagan and Haig wanted Habib to head back to the Middle East soon after Sharon did. His goal was to at least “sanitize the border” between Israel and Lebanon. To the north, he aimed to get the PLO to pull its heavy weapons back out of range of Israel. To the south, he aimed to get Sharon to pull back the tens of thousands of troops he had been mobilizing near the border. There was nothing he could do about terrorist attacks in Europe, but that border was his baby, and he wanted to keep it quiet. Habib felt that, if he could ease tensions along the border, maybe then he could make some progress on the broader issues.

He had two stops planned on his way back to the Middle East: a foreign policy conference in England and a short vacation in the Greek Islands with his eldest daughter, Phyllis. In the thirty years since she had been born, he had taken only four vacations. But now, for three days, father and daughter would have a little time together.

## *The War That Got Away*

The conference, held at the Ditchley estate in Oxford every year, brought together Middle East experts, current and former officials from various countries, and a handful of journalists specializing in the Middle East to discuss issues of the region. Habib was the chairman.

As the first or second paper was being read Friday evening, June 4, Habib got word that the Israeli ambassador to England, Shlomo Argov, had been shot in London. Argov had survived, but Habib knew this was serious. He turned to the colleague beside him and said, “Oh, Christ, here it goes up again! The Israelis are going to use that to get after something.” He told another he was going to have to leave and told Phyllis their vacation would have to wait a bit.

The Israelis’ response to the Argov shooting was to bomb over twenty-five sites around Beirut and elsewhere in Lebanon, including Palestinian refugee camps, a PLO headquarters building, and an empty sports stadium where they suspected the PLO had an ammunition dump. The attacks killed more than sixty and wounded two-hundred. The Palestinians responded with a twenty-four-hour rocket barrage on southern Lebanon and northern Israel, killing one Israeli and wounding fifteen.

The minute that first PLO rocket whistled over the border, Arik Sharon finally had his *casus belli*. The July 24 ceasefire was off. The invasion of Lebanon was on.

## Endnotes

41 Let’s face it: Habib interview with Mulcahy

41 They went back: Haig 5-11-94; Kim 9-21-93; “Gen. Haig Arrives Here To Brief Park on Viet,” Korea Times, 1-21-73

41 Avert it: The US’ top priority in the Middle East at the time was to ensure that the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli treaty be implemented on schedule by the end of April 1982. That treaty called for the Israelis to give back the Sinai Peninsula, which they had captured from Egypt in the 1967 war. The deadline was now a year away, and none of the preliminary steps had been taken that might convince the Israelis to go through with their promised withdrawal. So State’s policy priority was to keep Lebanon quiet, “at least keep it quiet long enough so it doesn’t screw up our top priority, which was to make sure that the treaty was actually implemented” (Veliotes 4-20-93; Veliotes ADST oral history).

41 Agility: Haig 5-11-94

41 Cardiologist: Cheitlin 3-26-93. Habib assured Haig he was “in tip-top shape.” Haig himself had had a heart bypass operation the previous year and felt fine now, so he readily took Habib’s word for it (Haig 5-11-94).

41-45 Historical background on Lebanon, Israel, PLO: Massoulié, p. 22-29, 135-47; “Making Sense of the Middle East,” parts 1 and 2, The Stanford Magazine, Spring 1986 and Summer 1986; “Beirut—Up From the Rubble,” National Geographic, February 1983; Dunnigan, p. 29-40; Kissinger Upheaval, p. 787-89; Friedman, p. 8, 11-18; Gabriel, p. 33-34; Zamir, preface and p. 1-3; Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 19, 31-32; “War or Compromise on Security,” Washington Post, 5-14-81; Habib cable from Beirut 08674, 010735Z Dec 81, par. 3; “Beirut: City of Money and Mystery,” Reader’s Digest, 11-64; “Sport on the

## CURSED IS THE PEACEMAKER

Far Shores of Eden,” *Sports Illustrated*, 3-29-65; Dillon 2-28-02; “Superpowers and Small States: an Overview of American-Lebanese Relations,” by Paul E. Salem, *The Beirut Review*, Spring 1993, [www.lcps-lebanon.org/pub/breview/br5/psalemb5pt2.html](http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/pub/breview/br5/psalemb5pt2.html).

In France’s original conception, the Christians enjoyed a slight majority in the new Lebanon. That slight majority became the basis of power allocations within the government. But as demographics shifted over the decades, Christians became a smaller and smaller minority. Yet no new census was ever conducted, and power allocations were not recalculated to reflect changing realities. Much of the contention within Lebanon can be viewed as attempts by Muslims and Druze to win the proportional share of power that they feel they have been denied. Druze are a sect that splintered off from Islam in the eleventh century. Their religious beliefs are a closely guarded secret, and they do not allow converts. Lebanon became independent of France in 1943. Technically, the Syrian army entered Lebanon under the auspices of the Arab League. Syrian president Hafaz al-Assad said on July 20, 1976, “Historically, Syria and Lebanon are one country and one people” (Israeli, p. 260).

Some years after Pierre Gemayel’s militia attacked the bus full of Palestinians, his son Bashir laughed about it to the American ambassador to Lebanon, saying, “We showed them. We killed everybody who had a Muslim name!” (Dillon 2-28-02).

45 Bashir, alliance, Zahle: Parker, p. 174-75; Zamir, p. 2-3; Seale, p. 369-70; Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 11-34; Petran, p. 259; Gabriel, p. 60; Sharon, p. 428-29; Lewis in Quandt, p. 230; Randal, p. 231; Cobban, p. 35; Friedman, p. 137-40; Hill 7-17-93. Since Pierre Gemayel and his sons Bashir and Amin were all well-known players in the story, they are generally referred to by only their first names for clarity. Notions of a Jewish-Maronite alliance went back to the nineteenth century, and discussions about an alliance to fight the PLO began in March 1976 (Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 11-13). Bashir’s alliance with Israel was no secret (e.g., Beirut 08673, 010730Z Dec 81, par. 3). Zahle stands by the highway that runs between Beirut and Damascus. Both the Israelis’ downing of the helicopters and the Syrians’ introduction of missiles violated the Red Line Agreement.

The missiles, Soviet-made SAM-6s, were placed 30–50 miles from Israeli territory and had a range of about 5 miles. They thus posed no offensive threat to the people of Israel in the way the PLO’s Katyusha rockets did. The missiles were only a defensive threat to Israeli aircraft flying in that part of Lebanon (Dillon 5-9-94 and 11-16-96; Dillon ADST oral history; Howell 9-6-93). The danger those missiles posed, says Haig 5-11-94, was “with respect to Israeli air superiority” and the need “to keep Israel’s qualitative edge in military terms in place inviolable.”

45-46 April 30: Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 35; Sharon, p. 429. Whereas conventional ambassadors are accredited to deal with only the single country to which they are assigned, a special envoy is authorized to deal with any countries that are relevant to the issue at hand.

46 Excuse, cooler, life-line: Lewis ADST oral history

46-47 Really intended, informal understanding, Katyushas, ready for truce: Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 35-37; Schoenbaum, p. 278; Davis, p. 64; Seale, p. 371; Randal, p. 236-39; Evron, p. 99; Gowers, p. 186; Petran, p. 261-62; Sharon, p. 430-32; Lewis ADST oral history; Lewis 2-17-02; Schulster 1-5-02

47 Informal understanding: Habib interview with the author 12-20-83; Parker, p. 181; Lewis ADST oral history; Lewis 2-17-02; Dillon ADST oral history; Beinlin 10-30-93

47 Sharon objected: Sharon, p. 432-33

47 Long-term arrangements: For example, Amman 08896, 051454Z Dec 81, par. 11, 13

47 Bargain with the PLO: Draper 4-13-93, 4-25-93, and 2-24-02; Draper ADST oral history; Beinlin 10-30-93

47-48 Sharon hero, symbol, military achievements: “Ariel Sharon: Feisty Politician Is Not a Natural Diplomat,” *The New York Times*, 10-10-98; “Sharon’s Muscle Evokes Hopes and Some Fears,” *The New York Times*, 10-20-98; Sachar, p. 170

48 Also earned a reputation: Sachar, p. 170; “Desert Hawk,” *Vanity Fair*, January 2002

48 Ultra-hawk: Davis, p. 65

48 Eagleburger: Lewis cable from Tel Aviv 11097, 221519Z Jul 82, par. 2; Eagleburger 7-3-93. Begin

## *The War That Got Away*

objected to these “zoological” references to Sharon by Eagleburger.

48 Invoked security: Davis, p. 66, based on Ezer Weizman, *The Battle for Peace*, p. 141, 222

48 Judgment: Lewis ADST oral history

48 Appalled: Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 37-38. The context of the quote is Sharon’s earlier lobbying to be special coordinator of the various security services. Being defense minister would entail even more sensitive powers than coordinator.

48 Ten times: Davis, p. 65, citing Prof. Nadav Safran

48 Golda Meir: quoted by Oriana Fallaci in “Sharon: ‘I Wanted Them Out of Beirut; I Got What I Wanted,’” *Washington Post*, 8-29-82

48 Entrust: Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 38

48-49 1981 election, take a walk: Lewis ADST oral history. As Lewis tells the story, what turned things around at the last minute was a night club entertainer telling jokes as a warm-up act at a Labor rally, during which he referred to Sephardic Jews as “bums.” Begin seized upon the crack, saying that that’s what Labor thinks of Sephardic Jews. Lewis adds, “Had [that entertainer] not made that crack, Sharon would not have become Defense Minister; Begin would not have been Prime Minister; there would not have been a Lebanon War; there would have been no Sabra and Shatila; and the whole course of the next five or ten years would have been different.”

49 Mission complete, golf: Dillon 11-16-96; Habib interview with Mulcahy; “Ex-envoy urges change in Latin America policy,” *San Jose Mercury News* 8-30-81

49 Confidence: Lewis 4-10-94. Early in his mission, *Newsweek* wrote, “If the Arabs and Israelis agree on anything about the Lebanese missile crisis, it is that Philip Habib is a superb diplomat. In Beirut, Damascus, Jerusalem and Riyadh—the capitals he visited during two weeks of shuttle diplomacy—the special U.S. envoy won high marks for diligence, discretion and a deft personal touch. ‘His mind is brilliant,’ Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin told a television interviewer last week. ‘I think he is one of the most able diplomats of our time. I am so impressed by him, by his wisdom, by his energy and by his efforts—physical, moral, intellectual.’ After a pause, Begin added: ‘But he did not yet achieve results’” (“Habib Still Plays For Time,” *Newsweek*, 6-1-81).

A few months after the July 24 ceasefire, Begin and Sharon started putting the Americans on notice that, while the deal was fine as far as it went, it did not go nearly far enough. The PLO was still causing trouble in ways unaddressed by the ceasefire, Begin and Sharon said, and if the PLO didn’t stop, the ceasefire would be off and the Israelis would have to take matters into their own hands in Lebanon. The first warning came from Begin to Haig at Anwar Sadat’s funeral in October 1981 (Haig 5-11-94; Cannon, p. 393).

49 Returned to the region: Haig’s objective in sending Habib back was, Haig wrote, “to defuse Israeli interests in exercising the military option in Lebanon” while advancing the political and security situation (Haig memo to The President, “The Next Habib Mission,” 11-11-81; State Department press briefing, 10-13-81, in State 273438, 140016Z Oct 81; State 278253, 192147Z Oct 81). The Egyptians too were anxious to have him come back. The Syrians were not. Just before he arrived in the region, the US signed a military agreement with Israel. On December 2, leaders of Syrian president Assad’s ruling Baath Party led some 300,000 Syrian demonstrators on a march through Damascus, ostensibly to protest a bombing there but chanting “Habib, Habib go away” (“300,000 Syrians protest visit of U.S. envoy Habib to Damascus,” *Los Angeles Times* story in *St. Petersburg Times* 12-3-81). Habib encouraged the Syrians to withdraw their missiles gradually while things were quiet. They replied that they would not do so as long as Begin demanded their withdrawal (Amman 08896, 051454Z Dec 81, par. 11).

On the eve of his arrival, Lebanese security forces said they had uncovered a plot by a group of Libyans in Lebanon to assassinate Habib when he came to Beirut. If there was a plot, exposure and tighter security measures foiled it (Beirut 08799, 041620Z Dec 81; Tel Aviv 18674, 041808Z Dec 81; UPI report of 12-4-81 quoted in Tel Aviv 18675, 041809Z Dec 81).

49 Draper’s background: Draper ADST oral history; Dillon 2-28-02. Draper had begun his career as a chemist with the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos in 1946-47, but soon realized his calling was international affairs, not science.

## CURSED IS THE PEACEMAKER

49 Only in force: This is according to an Israeli politician who asked not to be identified by name, but many other sources say the same (for example, Sachar, p. 172)

49 Hopeless: Sharon, p. 434-35

49-50 Formula, shat: Draper 4-25-93. Draper was deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau for Near Eastern Affairs responsible for the Israel-Lebanon-Syria geographic area. Habib had met with Sharon at least once before, on May 12, 1980, when Sharon was agriculture minister and Habib was in the region to try to mediate disputes between Arabs and Israelis over water rights ("U.S. envoy Habib relaying Yarmuk water 'bargaining,'" Jerusalem Post 5-13-80).

50 Map, his analysis: Brown cable Tel Aviv 18681, 051155Z Dec 81; Habib interview with Tueni; Draper 4-25-93; Sharon, p. 429, 434-35. Like other Arab states, Lebanon had since 1949 been technically still at war with Israel. Sharon's point about Lebanon associating with the free world was meant to contrast with Syria's association with the Soviet Union and thus to resonate with Haig's Cold Warrior view of the Middle East.

50 Adhering, violating: Lewis ADST oral history; Habib interview with Tueni; Habib cable Jerusalem 01781, 082022Z Jun 82, par. 7-8

50 Fast move: Sharon, p. 435

50 Quite clear, own opinion: Draper 4-25-93; Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 66. Calling this just his own opinion was true, if disingenuous (Lewis 4-10-94): A defense minister's opinion of what should be done tends to soon become official policy. It is normal for countries to have contingency plans for military operations (Howell 9-6-93), and the Israeli Defense Forces had been developing such a plan for Lebanon since before Sharon became defense minister ("Begin's Rhetoric and Sharon's Tactics," Foreign Affairs, Fall 1982, p. 73-74).

50-51 Instructed his chief: Brown cable Tel Aviv 18681, 051155Z Dec 81, par. 9

51 Twentieth century: Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 66. This is the earliest published account of what Habib said. Other accounts attribute different words to him, but all accounts are consistent that he expressed astonishment, alarm about the dire consequences of such an ill-advised move, and strong opposition (Brown cable Tel Aviv 18681, 051155Z Dec 81; Draper 4-25-93, 4-13-93, and 12-22-94; Habib interviews with Mulcahy and Tueni; Lewis 4-10-94; Lewis ADST oral history; Teicher, p. 193; Seale, p. 375; Howell 9-6-93; Hill 6-15-93; "Minutes of Sharon-Habib Meeting," TA241034 Tel Aviv DAVAR in Hebrew 24 May 82, pp. 1, 2, in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Reports, Middle East & Africa, 1982, 05/28, p. 14; "Sharon Reportedly Outlined Lebanon War Plan in 1981" and "U.S. Backs Lewis Version," New York Times, 5-26-85). Draper (4-25-93) says Sharon "did not think the Syrians would intervene. He thought they would just retreat. He told us he thought the chance of all-out war with Syria was tiny. That was a point where Phil strongly disagreed. But what he said was so staggering that it's not something you might discuss the pros and cons with because it might suggest that there are pros."

51 Lewis, denied: "Envoy Says Sharon Outlined Invasion Plan to U.S. in 1981," Washington Post, 5-24-85; "Sharon Reportedly Outlined Lebanon War Plan in 1981" and "U.S. Backs Lewis Version," New York Times, 5-26-85; "Sharon Reacts to Lewis' Disclosures on Lebanon War," TA230904 Tel Aviv Yedi'ot Aharonot in Hebrew 23 May 85, pp. 1, 14, and "Sharon Explains Contacts With U.S. on Lebanon, TA240745 Jerusalem Government Press Office in English 23 May 85, both in Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Reports, Middle East & Africa, 1982, 05/23-24, p. 11. Draper too was amazed: "I mean, telling us their secret plans so openly. Jesus, it was remarkable. Foreign governments don't tell you in advance what they're going to do militarily" (Draper 4-25-93). Sharon's denials focused mostly on whether he had revealed details, not on whether he had revealed the grand sweep of his plan. Habib backed up Lewis' account (Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Reports, May 23 and 24, 1985), which was consistent with his own account and with Draper's.

51 Trap Palestinian: Habib interview with Tueni

51 Arrogant, disdain, anti-American, oppose anything: Draper 4-25-93 and 12-18-94

51-52 Drip method, nuclear: Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 65; Lewis in Quandt, p. 230-31; Seale, p. 370; Petran, p. 262. Sharon explicitly told Habib in the meeting that, if something happened, he did not want the

## *The War That Got Away*

US taken by surprise (Brown cable Tel Aviv 18681, 051155Z Dec 81, par. 9).

52 Become a party: Draper 4-25-93

52 Alarm, Sinai: Draper 1-13-02; Velioes 4-20-93; Velioes ADST oral history. The declassified cable that reports on Habib's meeting with Sharon (Brown cable Tel Aviv 18681, 051155Z Dec 81) is silent about the most important parts of the meeting. "We sanitized the cable of the most sensitive parts," says Draper (1-13-02), choosing to report them instead orally by secure phone and in person when they returned to Washington. Haig (5-11-94) later would not remember ever having heard about this meeting from Habib.

52 Feeble: Schiff, "The Green Light," Foreign Policy, #50, Spring 1983. Schiff writes that "the American nay was so feeble that the Israelis regarded it merely as a diplomatic maneuver designed to exonerate the United States should the military operation go sour." Feeble is not a word one would expect to hear applied to anything Habib said. His colleagues agree that it was not Habib's communication that Schiff was referring to. "Phil wasn't in the later meetings where this 'feeble' response came out," says Draper (4-25-93).

52 Mostly out: Velioes 5-6-93

52-53 Scout out, your business, Chamoun: Sharon, p. 437-43; Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 48-51; also Schiff, "The Green Light," Foreign Policy, #50, Spring 1983; Randal, p. 246-47. Chamoun was also the president who invited American troops into Lebanon in 1957.

53 Consul general: Velioes ADST oral history

53 Bashir told: Dillon ADST oral history

53 UN: Draper 4-25-93

53 Journals: Jansen, p. 1

53 25,000: Jansen, p. 1; Schiff, "The Green Light," Foreign Policy, #50, Spring 1983; Habib interview with Tueni

53 Chancellor: Schiff, "The Green Light," Foreign Policy, #50, Spring 1983

53 Pretext: The word pretext is often used in the context of Sharon's lead-up to the invasion (e.g., Velioes 4-29-93; Yaacobi 2-14-95; Schiff, "The Green Light," Foreign Policy, #50, Spring 1983). As Israeli Foreign Ministry Director General David Kimche puts it, Israel was "on a course for war; it required only some inflammatory act by the PLO to light the fuse" (Kimche, p. 144-45, cited in Parker, p. 176).

53 Single incident: Habib interview with Dusclaud. Habib said, "Matter of fact, there was practically no evidence of any hostile action from Lebanese territory directly into Israel from that point [July '81] on. Israelis don't admit that, but it's true. We kept track in those days" (Habib interview with Mulcahy). Yaacobi (2-14-95) agrees that the border had been quiet since the ceasefire. On the quiet of the border since the July 24 ceasefire, see also Benziman, p. 268-69, and Bavly and Salpeter, p. 234 (quoted in Davis, p. 3). Habib did agree that the ceasefire applied to attacks on Israel that originated in Lebanon but were carried out across the Jordan-Israel border (Habib cable Jerusalem 01781, 082022Z Jun 82, par. 8). There had been one such instance: A squad of guerrillas went from Lebanon into Jordan and crossed from there into Israel to attempt an attack (Habib interview with Tueni).

53 I said no: Habib interview with Tueni

54 Cannot afford, no one agreement: Habib cable Jerusalem 01781, 082022Z Jun 82, par. 7-8; Lewis ADST oral history

54 With the situation: Sharon, p. 450. Israel by now had withdrawn from the Sinai, as scheduled, in April.

54 I'd kick: Haig 5-11-94

54 Feel inclined: The one quoted is Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger (10-7-93), who, it should be noted, is himself extremely critical of Israel. But virtually all State Department people interviewed on the subject offer essentially the same assessment of Haig's position.

## CURSED IS THE PEACEMAKER

54 Presidential ambitions: Veliotis ADST oral history

54 Indians: Haig 5-11-94

54-55 Content of Haig-Sharon meeting: Memorandum of Conversation, "The Secretary's Meeting with Israeli Defense Minister Sharon," 5-28-82, S/S number 8215555, P900060-0673 and P900060-0674. Substantial portions of the declassified record of the discussion are excised. The memo sometimes uses quotation marks but usually does not. The quotes here are what the document says, which may or may not be the speakers' actual words. Punctuation altered for clarity.

55 Loudly: Teicher, p. 195

55 Did not apply: Sharon, p. 335

56 Audience, privately: Haig, Caveat, p. 335; Haig 5-11-94; Draper 4-25-93

56 Right to tell: Haig, Caveat, p. 335

56 Conceded the point: Schiff & Ya'ari, p. 73; Teicher, p. 195. As Haig put it on another occasion, "How do we think, as Americans, we can be allies with anyone if we tell them they don't have the right to defend themselves?" (Haig 5-11-94).

56 Thought he did: Habib interview with Tueni; Shultz 7-25-94

56 Your opposition: Draper 4-25-93

56 Bully: E.g., Draper 4-25-93; Lewis 4-10-94; Hill 7-16-94; another State Department official who asked not to be identified by name.

56 Utterly opposed: Draper 4-25-93; Dillon ADST oral history. See p. 99-100 for Habib's wording of what he considered an appropriate warning to Begin. A week and a half before Sharon met with Haig, Ambassador Lewis sent State a stark warning about what Sharon needed to hear: "All senior U.S. officials whom he sees in Washington should talk turkey to Sharon about the dangerous situation in Lebanon. To slide over it would be to give him a dangerous signal and reinforce his conviction that whatever Israel ultimately decides it must do about the PLO in Lebanon can be done without long-lasting damage to U.S.-Israeli relations. . . . We are skating on extremely thin ice at this moment with respect to Lebanon. Although there is not a strong majority yet in the Cabinet, much less in the country at large, to support Sharon's determination to deal the PLO in Lebanon a devastating blow, regardless of the international diplomatic consequences, there is a growing sense of inevitability here that it is only a matter of time. One major successful terrorist act which produces several dead could tip the balance . . . For this reason, it is extremely important that Sharon hear clearly from top U.S. officials what kind of complications would inevitably result for Israel if a major operation were launched using American supplied weapons. He has a considerable capacity to minimize these complications and to assert to his colleagues that the U.S. reaction will be merely verbal and short-lived. If in fact our reaction would be different, Sharon should know it well in advance, as should Begin. We run grave risks of misleading the Israelis and producing even more complications for both our countries if they believe a major military move into Lebanon would have no direct consequences past U.N. condemnations or other symbolic or verbal sanctions. . . . Don't allow Sharon to leave Washington with any illusion about the degree to which a major military move into Lebanon would affect the course of U.S.-Israeli relations, if indeed it would have those consequences" (Lewis cable Tel Aviv 07285 May 14, 1982, quoted in State 133828, 172000Z May 82).

56 Clearly agreed: When interviewed for this book, Haig said (5-11-94), "How do we think, as Americans, we can be allies with anyone if we tell them they don't have the right to defend themselves? My God! Of course the Israelis had a right to go in and defend themselves. And we had no right to tell them they didn't if they were attacked from sanctuary, and they were." The chapter "The Other General" discusses Haig's agreement with Sharon about other issues, including the applicability of the July 24 ceasefire to attacks against Jews in Europe.

Sharon may or may not have sensed Haig's excitement with the invasion plans. But Veliotis says he and Draper did when they met with him later that night. A "rather enthusiastic" Haig still had a large map of Lebanon on an easel by his desk. With an air of what Veliotis calls "excitable belligerency," Haig showed them Sharon's ambitious plan, including linking Bashir's Christian militia in the middle

## *The War That Got Away*

of Lebanon with a proxy Christian militia that Israel sponsored in the south. Draper blurted out, "For Christ's sake, Mr. Secretary, there are a million and a half Muslims between them, and at least a million of them are Shi'a!" Haig seemed surprised. Veliotos said, "If [Israel's] plan is to do all of this, that means war with Syria, and God knows the carnage. You will have a Middle East policy in tatters." He and Draper also recommended sending a follow-up message (Veliotos 4-29-93; Veliotos ADST oral history). Shi'a are followers of the smaller of the two main branches of Islam, with adherents concentrated in Iran and Lebanon. This meeting was only a few months after the end of the Teheran hostage crisis, in which militant Shi'a in Iran had held American diplomats hostage for over a year. The Shi'a of Lebanon had so far been not been active in opposing Israel, but an invasion through their ranks would certainly alienate and possibly radicalize them (Dillon 2-27-02).

56 Went home confident: Habib heard from an Israeli whom he considered very authoritative that Sharon "went away with the idea that he had the green light to go ahead with this campaign" (interview with Tueni).

56 Job done: Gabriel, p. 14, 82

56 OK from us: Habib interview with Tueni. Several others also urged Haig to send a follow-up letter. As Haig puts it (5-11-94), "The guys in the bureau's pants started to get wet. They came rushing in and said, 'Hey, this guy's dangerous! You better get another message out to him.'" Though he did send the letter, he brushed off their concerns since they had heard only what was said in the big meeting, not what he considered the real one, the private one.

56 Letter: Haig letter to Begin 5-28-82, "Dear Mr. Prime Minister," 8215157. The understated letter urges "complete restraint," but reiterates "how deeply we understand the very real threat of violence Israel faces. As Minister Sharon said, no one has the right to tell Israel what decision it should take in the defense of its people. We are only expressing our belief that nations facing threats, including the U.S. and Israel, should carefully weigh the consequences of how such challenges are handled."

56 Approval: Sharon, p. 451. Schiff writes that "For Sharon's plan to succeed, however, Israel needed an assurance from the United States that it would not obstruct Israeli moves into Lebanon" ("The Green Light," *Foreign Policy*, #50, Spring 1983). Howard Teicher, who represented the National Security Council in the meeting, writes (p. 195), "considering the glint in Sharon's eye and the forceful, overbearing way he clutched his briefing papers and pounded the conference table that day, I believe that Sharon would have found a way to interpret Haig's comments about the nice weather in Washington as encouragement of an Israeli invasion of Lebanon."

57 Disproportionate: Yaacobi 2-14-95

57 Hunting license: Veliotos 4-29-93. Schiff writes that "the import of Haig's response for Sharon was that the United States did not oppose a limited military operation provided there was sufficient reason for one. From Sharon's point of view the American had provided a green light. The halfhearted, feeble warnings subsequently voiced by Haig were irrelevant" ("The Green Light," *Foreign Policy*, #50, Spring 1983).

57 Professionalism: Habib interview with the author, *The Stanford Magazine*, Spring 1984

57 Wildly in love, respected: Veliotos 4-29-93. Veliotos (ADST oral history) said that Reagan "in his first year and a half in office, was most proud of Phil Habib's peace missions."

57 Habib's attitude: This source, one of Habib's colleagues, asked not to be identified by name.

57 Aimed at the heart: Howell 9-6-93. In fact, they were surface-to-air missiles designed to shoot down jet planes flying overhead. Even if one missed and fell to earth, it lacked the range to land in Israel.

57-58 Soviets: Dillon ADST oral history. As the ambassador to Lebanon and thus the diplomat working in the PLO's home base, Dillon considered such notions ludicrous.

58 Read few papers, entertained: Draper ADST oral history

58 Talking points: Lewis ADST oral history; Salem, p. 25

58 Couldn't remember: Habib interview with Stuart Eizenstat, 5-13-92, p. 41. Reagan was the best

## CURSED IS THE PEACEMAKER

friend Israel ever had in the White House. He had what Dillon (ADST oral history) calls “an emotional pro-Israeli bias. He had a romanticized Hollywood view of brave, little Israel.” Draper (ADST oral history) says he was a genuinely nice man, whose benign, forgiving nature led Israel’s leaders to think they could take the US for granted.

58 Educate him: Veliotos 4-29-93

58 Habib earned: Veliotos 4-29-93

58 That crowd: Veliotos 4-29-93

58 His turf: Reagan, p. 270

58 Baker, Bush, Clark: Haig 5-11-94

58 Do him in, suicidal: Veliotos 4-29-93; Reagan, p. 361; Haig 5-11-94. Haig blamed them for allowing Israel to invade Lebanon, by ignoring his prior warnings. He says he sent a memo to Reagan two months prior to the invasion warning that a war was imminent and suggesting steps to prevent it. But, he says, “that memo never even got to the president! It sat on Bill Clark’s desk!” (Haig 5-11-94).

58-59 Isolated, stupid: Haig 5-11-94. Haig adds, “Now, I’m sure there were exceptions” to Reagan’s lack of engagement, “like when he went into Grenada.” One writer says, “This chaotic situation [as described by Haig in his resignation letter] in foreign policy affairs during the Reagan Administration reflected the poor leadership of the president, the lack of cohesiveness inside the Administration, and the unsteadiness of purpose in adopting one clear-cut line of foreign policy. Instead, a mixture of policies and personalities clashes [sic] among the decision-makers laid bare the management problem of the Administration” (Korbani, p. 191).

59 Sanitize: Habib interview with Parker, which is the basis of Parker, p. 181

59 Broader issues: The US had recently decided to try to breathe fresh life into a series of talks on Palestinian autonomy, with the aim of reaching an outcome within sixty days. This plan was revealed during the Ditchley conference, perhaps by Habib himself in the “candid analysis” he gave the conference (Patrick Seale, “The Search for an Arab-Israeli Settlement,” reporting the conference held at Ditchley Park, 4-6 June 1982; Ditchley Conference Report No. 7/1982, p. 1).

Habib also hoped to establish a contact group (representatives of several interested and influential countries) and eventually an international conference at which the Lebanese factions could work out their differences and thus stabilize Lebanon (Eagleburger cable State 155256, 070141Z Jun 82, p. 3).

59 Four vacations, Greek islands: Habib interview with Mulcahy; Marjorie Habib 2-27-93; Phyllis Habib 7-7-97. He got a month of leave every year and never took it.

59 Get after something, have to leave: Habib interviews with Mulcahy and Parker. Though Argov lived, the bullet lodged in his spine and he was badly disabled for life. He was shot by the Abu Nidal terrorist organization, an independent and virulently anti-PLO group. Abu Nidal was in fact under a death sentence by the PLO for having assassinated moderate Palestinians (Dillon ADST oral history; Draper 5-4-93; Yaacobi 2-14-95). Though Begin and his Cabinet knew that the culprit was Abu Nidal, it made no difference to Begin. “They’re all PLO,” he said. “Abu Nidal, Abu Smidal. We have to strike at the PLO” (Schiff & Ya’ari, p. 98).

59 Israeli response: Gabriel, p. 25, 82; Cannon, p. 200; Gowers, p. 201

59 Palestinian response: Gabriel, p. 59; Seale, p. 377, 379. The PLO’s response was a colossal blunder, since it gave Israel the final straw it needed to launch its invasion.