

LET'S NOT PUNISH OURSELVES FOR BEIRUT

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Hardly have we finished counting the dead in Beirut before a Congressional inquiry into the incident has begun. Many questions need to be answered: Who carried out the bombing? More important, who directed the operation? What did they hope to achieve? If we can identify who was behind the bombing, what should the United States do about it? What can we do to protect the Marines against future terrorist attacks?

These are the tough questions. They confront some of the difficulties and genuine dilemmas inherent in dealing with terrorism. Any inquiry along these lines is likely to be a frustrating experience.

The inquiry, however, may focus on another set of questions: How was this permitted to happen? Why were the Marines so vulnerable? In a city where car bombs seem as common as taxis, why wasn't security better? Were there warnings that had been ignored? Who has been negligent? And what should be done about them?

These questions imply assigning culpability on our side. They suggest a head hunt. Now *that* is something we can do. But before proceeding too far down the path of judgment, the interrogators might keep a few of the following things in mind.

Was security at the Marine headquarters adequate? In retrospect, obviously it was not. But there is a basic asymmetry in defending against terrorist attacks. Terrorists can attack anything, anywhere, and at any time. Governments cannot protect everything, everywhere, all of the time. It is a virtual certainty that terrorists will attack whatever is least defended. And it is a certainty, that there always will be something that is vulnerable. In April, it was the American embassy; in October it was the Marine headquarters. Next time, the target could be a helicopter ferrying troops from a ship, or even a civilian airliner, since terrorists in Lebanon possess rocket-propelled grenades and portable surface-to-air missiles. Or it could be a village in the mountains near Beirut where off-duty Marines are sent to rest. We must anticipate anything, realizing that we probably cannot protect everything.

The Marines can improve their security. They can retreat to heavily fortified redoubts. They can pour concrete around their headquarters, their outposts, and their checkpoints; double-fence their perimeters, top them with barbed wire, and build guard towers to cover the fence. They can clear the approach routes, dig tank traps, erect barriers, and put up high-intensity sodium vapor lamps until ultimately the American zone in Beirut comes to resemble a misplaced piece of the Berlin wall.

The primary task of the Marines in Lebanon will then become the protection of the Marines in Lebanon, rendering them incapable of doing what we sent them to do in the first place--assist in keeping the peace. Peacekeeping requires an active presence, not bunkers. An active presence means exposure and exposure means risk. One can contend that U.S. Marines cannot do much to keep the peace in that violent land and ought to be withdrawn anyway. That is a valid point for discussion but not a security issue.

If we try to assign responsibility on our side for the vulnerability of Marines to the bombing, we may fall victim to the terrorist trick of shifting blame. We have seen this before in hostage incidents. If a government or corporation refuses to yield to the demands of terrorists holding hostages, then, according to the terrorists, it is they and not the terrorists who are responsible for the deaths of the hostages. If a government orders an assault on terrorists barricaded with captives, it, and not the terrorists, is responsible for any deaths. If terrorists machinegun civilian bystanders at an airport, the victims are not innocent, they are culpable for having ignored terrorist declarations of war. If terrorists kill hundreds with a huge bomb, it is the fault of those who permitted a situation in which they would be bombed. Terrorists like to portray themselves as some inexorable force of nature, devoid of responsibility for their actions. Just because we cannot always get at them, we ought not to let them get away with laying the blame on us.

If the government were able to obtain incontrovertible proof of who was behind the Beirut bombing, the shock and outrage all Americans feel would be welded into a terrible wrath. The public would demand

retribution. But if the government is not able to do that, we turn our anger inward against ourselves. We are angry because our government appears impotent. We are angry because security was not better. We demand to know how we got into this mess in the first place. Instead of retribution, pressure for withdrawal grows, which is exactly what those who are behind the bombing want to achieve. That is why they invented a group to claim credit for the act but disguise their own involvement. Terrorism is not without logic.

In almost every terrorist incident, governments are at a disadvantage. Terrorists create violent dramas in which they and their victims are the central figures. Governments seldom get to play the role of hero. Intelligence has failed, security has been demonstrably breached, the government is unable to satisfy the public's appetite for action.

The measures that governments can take seem prosaic. If terrorists blow up embassies, governments allocate funds to increase security at diplomatic facilities, a logical and useful step, but somehow ungratifying.

There are, of course, such things as command responsibility, accountability, negligence, and dereliction of duty, but in trying to determine who is responsible for the deaths of more than 200 Marines in Beirut, we ought not to forget who the bad guys are. The Marines in Beirut died because some Middle East government or group considered peace not in its interest and persuaded some fanatic to crash a truck loaded with explosives into the Marine headquarters. They did not die because we blundered or abdicated responsibility for their safety.

It is understandable that in our anger we demand blood. Let it not be our own.

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