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Source: *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 106, No. 1 (Spring, 1991), pp. 57-82

Published by: The Academy of Political Science

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2152174>

Accessed: 21/03/2010 21:38

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The Reagan Administration and Coercive Diplomacy: Restraining More Than Remaking Governments

BRUCE W. JENTLESON

One of the highest priorities Ronald Reagan and his foreign policy team had when they came to office in 1981 was to break the United States out of what they considered its “Vietnam trauma” aversion to the use of military force as an instrument of foreign policy. It wasn’t so much that the Reagan administration wanted to engage in new wars as that it believed in the utility of limited military force as an integral part of a coercive diplomacy strategy for bringing political pressure to bear on America’s adversaries.

Two conceptual distinctions are important in defining a coercive diplomacy strategy. First is the difference, as emphasized in the work of Alexander George, between coercive diplomacy and deterrence. Deterrence involves the use of threats and shows of force “to dissuade an opponent from doing something he has not yet started to do.” Coercive diplomacy, however, uses threats and limited force to get an adversary “to stop short of his goal . . . [or] undo his action”—to stop what he or she has already started to do or to reverse what he or she already has done.¹ While any particular use of force may have both deterrent and coercive diplomacy objectives, it still is important for analytic purposes to make this distinction.

¹ Alexander L. George, et al., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 24. Also see Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 69–78.

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Second is that coercive diplomacy is “not a military strategy at all but rather a political strategy.” It involves using force in a “limited, selective manner . . . to induce the opponent to revise his calculations and agree to a mutually acceptable termination of the conflict.”² Costs are to be inflicted on the adversary, but of a type and magnitude more geared to influence his decision than to physically impose one’s will upon him. “The activity of the military units themselves,” as Barry Blechman and Stephen Kaplan state in their study, “does not attain the objective; goals are achieved through the effect of the force on the perceptions of the actor.”³ Coercive diplomacy thus is also distinct from what George calls a “quick, decisive military strategy,” which “largely dispenses with threats, diplomacy or subtle modes of persuasion.”⁴ The invasions of Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989) are recent examples more accurately seen as quick, decisive military strategies rather than coercive diplomacy.

Five principal cases of coercive diplomacy can be identified during the Reagan years: the 1982–1984 deployment of the Marines to Lebanon as part of the second Multinational Force (MNF); the military and diplomatic pressure against Libya, culminating in the 1986 bombing; the 1987–1988 reflagging of Kuwaiti oil tankers and deployment of the U.S. Navy against Iran in the Persian Gulf; and the military aid and covert assistance provided throughout the Reagan years to the Afghan mujaheddin and the Nicaraguan contras.⁵

In all these cases the Reagan strategy was more than deterrence but less than a quick, decisive military strategy. Military force was used, not just threatened, but it was kept limited and geared to political objectives. Those political objectives were of two basic types: the imposition of *foreign policy restraint* on an adversary engaged in aggression or other actions deemed threatening to the United States; and the engineering of *internal political change* within another state, whether in support of an existing government considered an ally or to overthrow a government considered an adversary. Both objectives were pursued to at least some degree in all five cases.

I make two principal arguments in this article. First, with respect to the success and failure of coercive diplomacy, the Reagan record shows it to have been a much more effective strategy for imposing foreign policy restraint (for example, forcing Soviet troops out of Afghanistan, containing Iran in the Persian Gulf, limiting Muammar el-Qaddafi’s role in international terrorism) than for engineering internal political change (bringing the Afghan mujaheddin or the Nicaraguan contras to power, ending the Lebanese civil war, eliminating Qaddafi).

Second, this differentiated pattern of coercive diplomacy effectiveness is to be explained, both for the Reagan-era cases and more generally, by three sets of con-

² George, *Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, 18.

³ Barry M. Blechman and Stephen S. Kaplan, *Force Without War: U.S. Armed Forces as a Political Instrument* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1978), 13.

⁴ George, *Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, 16–17.

⁵ Two other cases—Kampuchea/Cambodia and Angola—also could be considered cases of coercive diplomacy, but the U.S. role was more limited than in the five cases selected.

straints that vary with the two policy objectives: the *usability of military options*; the strength of the claim to *international legitimacy*; and the extent of *domestic political opposition* within the United States. All three sets of constraints tend to be less impinging for the foreign policy restraint objective than for the internal political change objective.

While stressing the significance of this basic pattern, I do not imply either decrees of failure or guarantees of success. On the one hand, strategies other than coercive diplomacy may be resorted to for overthrowing governments, as both the Grenada 1983 and Panama 1989 cases attest. There was nothing limited, selective, or inducing about thousands of American troops invading these small countries. Rather, in both cases the military action in and of itself achieved the U.S. objective: the adversaries were not just influenced; they were captured.

On the other hand, with respect to the foreign policy restraint objective, two limiting conditions are important to bear in mind. First, even when foreign policy restraint is achieved on immediate issues and threats, there is no assurance that more generalized foreign policy restraint will follow. Getting an adversary to cease aggression today is no small achievement, but it does not necessarily mean that he also will desist tomorrow.

Second, however critical the immediate objective may appear, coercive diplomacy must not be overplayed. Alliances of convenience, following the balance of power dictum “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” often are struck — as, for example, the Reagan administration did with Iraq against Iran. But strategists must be conscious — as the Reagan and Bush administrations before 2 August 1990 were not — of the risks of going too far in such relationships, of making them too unconditional, and of fixating too much on the immediate objective to the exclusion of longer-term balancing and security considerations.

THE RECORD OF REAGAN’S COERCIVE DIPLOMACY

Two caveats are in order. First, the case summaries presented herein are necessarily synopses, not in-depth analyses, the unavoidable trade-off in a comparative case study between the level of detail and the degree of generality. Second, the assessments of success and failure are conscious of the problems of both net assessment and attribution. I have tried to take into account the economic, political, and societal costs incurred, even when the policy objectives may have been achieved. I also have considered the fact that U.S. policy is never the only force at work in any situation and thus should not be overcredited for success or overblamed for failure.

Afghanistan

The best example of the effectiveness of coercive diplomacy for foreign policy restraint comes from the Afghanistan case. In fact, from an historical perspective the concessions the Soviet Union made in the April 1988 Geneva Accords amounted

to more than just foreign policy restraint. They were an unprecedented reversal of policy. Never before had the Red Army retraced its footsteps and withdrawn from a country it had invaded. Moreover, it did so on terms that hardly could be considered favorable. The length of the troop withdrawal period was both shortened and front-loaded. The Soviets conceded symmetry to the United States, allowing American military aid to the mujaheddin as long as Soviet aid to the Kabul regime continued. They also did not get any guarantees about the character or composition of a post-occupation Afghan government.

To be sure, a large share of the credit for the Soviet withdrawal unquestionably must go to the United Nations and in particular Under Secretary General for Special Political Affairs Diego Cordovez for his mediating and facilitating role throughout the six years of on-and-off negotiations. Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev also had his own reasons linked to his domestic and broader foreign policy agenda for ending what he himself called “this bleeding wound.” But American military aid to the mujaheddin made sure the bleeding couldn’t be stanchied. As concluded in a report by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), the Soviet decision to withdraw was heavily influenced by “the ability of the Afghan mujaheddin to continue and increase their military opposition. . . . Fundamental to this improvement was a significant increase in military supplies to the rebels.”⁶ American aid increased from only \$30 million in 1983 to over \$600 million by 1987. Moreover, beginning in mid-1986, it included the shoulder-fired Stinger surface-to-air missiles, later assessed by the Pentagon as “the war’s decisive weapon.”⁷ Thus, while other factors and forces entered in, the Reagan administration had a genuine claim to a substantial share of the credit for the restraint/reversal in Soviet policy.

American policy has been much less successful, however, in its efforts to depose the Najibullah regime and bring the mujaheddin to power. Around the time of the final withdrawal of Soviet troops in February 1989, the CIA made bold predictions that it was only a matter of when, not if, the Najibullah regime would fall and the mujaheddin would triumph. However, while Najibullah has proven to be as unpopular as advertised — there have been at least two coup attempts, including one in March 1990 by his defense minister — the mujaheddin have been weakened by their own military failures and politico-religious factionalism. Soon after the Soviet withdrawal, they suffered a major military setback in their siege of Jalalabad. And from the outset, the interim government proclaimed in February 1989 has remained a shell without any real authority, unable to assert control even over its own ostensibly constituent groups.⁸ The concern expressed by one State Depart-

⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 1987–88* (London: IISS, 1988), 135.

⁷ The U.S. Army report has not been officially released, but was leaked in the *Washington Post*, 5 July 1989.

⁸ The difficulties of the interim government in asserting its control were exemplified by a report in the *Washington Post*, 24 July 1989, about Finance Minister Hedayat Amin-Arsala, who “operates from a hotel room in Peshawar . . . with a staff of volunteers and furniture partly paid for from his own pocket.”

ment official that the struggle among the mujaheddin factions “may make Lebanon look like child’s play”⁹ was graphically underlined in July 1989 when fighters loyal to Gulbuddin Hekmatyr and his fundamentalist Hezb-i-Islami faction ambushed and murdered thirty leaders of a rival group. “In recent months,” one observer reported, “so much of the rebel groups’ energies have been expended in fighting among themselves that outsiders have been left to wonder if anything united them other than their resolve to rid Afghanistan of Soviet troops.” Things got so bad that in February 1990 the Bush administration suspended its \$30 million food aid program, because the food was “being stolen or sold to the Soviet-backed Afghan government.”¹⁰

Thus, while coercive diplomacy worked when the principal objective was Soviet foreign policy restraint, it has failed as a strategy for reconstituting the internal Afghan political order. Quite to the contrary, with the Russians gone and the mujaheddin raging their own internecine warfare, “many Afghans have begun to see the United States in a new guise, as a distant power that sanctioned the routine killing of civilians.”¹¹ By early 1990 the Bush administration had initiated a major policy reassessment, questioning whether a more political and less military strategy was now needed.¹²

Persian Gulf Reflagging

The 1987–1988 Persian Gulf reflagging and naval deployment case has been characterized elsewhere as an “extended deterrence” strategy, and a failed one at that.¹³ When force is used to persuade an adversary to call off an action already initiated, as distinct from dissuading some presumably contemplated but not yet initiated action, the strategy is more accurately characterized as coercive diplomacy than deterrence of any form. This was the case in the Reagan Persian Gulf strategy. The Iran-Iraq war *already* had been going on for over seven years. Iran *already* was attacking Kuwait, both its shipping and its territory. Iran also *already* had been involved in efforts to foment Islamic fundamentalism and destabilize such key regional allies as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. And the Iranian imprint *already* was undeniably there in the hostage-taking by the Islamic Jihad and Hizbollah in Lebanon.

⁹ Quote as reported on National Public Radio, “Morning Edition,” report by Anne Garrels, 11 January 1989.

¹⁰ John F. Burns, “Misery Replaces Hope in a Battered Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, 17 December 1989; Steve Coll and James Rupert, “U.S. Suspends Food Aid to Afghan Rebels in Dispute over Thefts,” *Washington Post*, 15 February 1990.

¹¹ John F. Burns, “Afghans: Now They Blame America,” *New York Times Magazine*, 4 February 1990.

¹² Thomas L. Friedman, “Baker to Propose New Afghan Deal During Soviet Trip,” *New York Times*, 5 February 1990; Robert Pear, “U.S. Weighs Shift in Afghan Policy,” *New York Times*, 14 January 1990; Zalmay Khalilzad, “Ending the Afghan War,” *Washington Post*, 7 January 1990.

¹³ Janice Gross Stein, “The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place,” *International Security* 13 (Winter 1988/89): 142–67.

There were many flaws in the Reagan strategy, in particular with the overtilt toward Iraq. It also may well be that had the Reagan administration not self-inflicted the Iran-contra and arms-for-hostages fiascos, some alternative strategy could have been better pursued. And while stopping short of overattributing credit to the exclusion of such other actors as the United Nations, the Reagan policy nevertheless does warrant an ample share. The presence of the U.S. Navy and its demonstrated willingness to meet Iranian provocations with both retaliatory and preventive military actions was key to keeping the sea lanes open while the war dragged on. It also provided Kuwait and other gulf states with at least a degree of protection from Iranian attacks, and in the process kept the Soviet role and presence limited. Only slightly more than a year after the reflagging operation began, it was a beleaguered Iran that agreed to a UN monitored ceasefire with Iraq on virtually the same terms it had previously rejected.

The strategy was not, however, cost-free, even in the immediate term. The costs were both budgetary (an estimated \$250 million) and human, most especially the innocent lives lost in the accidental attacks by an Iraqi warplane on the USS *Stark* in May 1987 and by the USS *Vincennes* on a civilian Iran Air flight in July 1988. Moreover, as Janice Gross Stein rightly stresses, at a number of points the Reagan administration ran substantial risks “of becoming trapped in a process of escalation it could not control.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, it managed to avert such a trap and to keep the costs limited, while coercing Iran into a substantial and significant degree of foreign policy restraint.

Contrary to many hopes if not expectations, this did not lead to more generalized moderation in Iranian foreign policy. Blowing up a civilian airliner in midair, as Iran is alleged to have done to Pan Am Flight 103 in December 1988, is not foreign policy moderation.¹⁵ Nor was pronouncement of a death sentence against the foreign author of a book deemed offensive (Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*). Nor were the assassinations of dissident and opposition leaders in exile. Nor was the bomb placed under the minivan of Sharon Rogers of San Diego, California, wife of Will Rogers, U.S. Navy, captain of the USS *Vincennes*.

The major stab at engineering Iranian internal political change had come with the arms-for-hostages “opening to the moderates.” That it was ill-conceived, among other things, is by now a given. In its wake, both in appearance and substance, the Reagan administration was very cautious about appearing to be meddling again in Iranian politics, although it hardly would have objected had the ayatollah been brought down during the Persian Gulf engagement. But he wasn’t.

Following Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s death, many in the West were heartened when “the moderates” came out on top, with Ayatollah Ali Khomeini chosen

¹⁴ Ibid., 148.

¹⁵ According to John Newhouse, “a widening consensus of experts inside and outside of government” believe Ahmed Jibril, leader of the splinter Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, to have been the perpetrator, with the Lebanese Hizbollah as the intermediary and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard as the originator and contractor. John Newhouse, “Annals of Intelligence: Changing Targets”, *New Yorker*, 10 July 1989, 71–82.

as the new imam and Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani elected president. Whatever his own dispositions may be, Rafsanjani has continued to face the dilemma that foreign policy militancy still has domestic political utility. The Ayatollah Khomeini's legacy, as embodied in his last will and testament, was one "of fierce animosity to the West, a militant assertion of Iran's Islamic identity."¹⁶ Thus, it is not just a matter of whether Rafsanjani keeps hold of power. In order to do so he must guard against being painted as violating the legacy of Khomeini. He surely has been conscious of this, for example, in his unwillingness to join the U.S.-led multinational coalition against the man and country against which Iran fought an eight-year war.

Libya

The principal objective of the April 1986 bombing raid against Tripoli and Benghazi was antiterrorism. By early 1986 terrorism had become "a growth industry."¹⁷ The number of terrorist incidents was up 30 percent, the number of injuries about 80 percent, and the death toll almost 300 percent. Moreover, Americans were increasingly being targeted: a navy seaman killed during the June 1985 TWA hijacking, the elderly crippled Leon Klinghoffer thrown overboard the *Achille Lauro*, an eleven-year-old girl killed during the Christmas 1985 attacks in the Rome and Vienna airports, and then in early April 1986 the bombing of a West Berlin discotheque injuring 230 and killing two people, including an American soldier. Qaddafi was linked to a number of these incidents; in the West Berlin bombing, intelligence intercepts provided the veritable smoking gun. The Reagan administration later cited five other terrorist plots that had been thwarted but that also involved Qaddafi. There also were unconfirmed reports of plans by Qaddafi to launch a major terrorist campaign within the United States proper, including a plot to assassinate President Reagan.¹⁸

While far from a cure-all for the scourge of terrorism, the bombing of Libya had its impact in a number of ways. Qaddafi's operations and training centers were severely damaged. He himself was wounded in the attack, and for a time thereafter he appeared extremely disoriented. For nearly two years his role in terrorism fell off quite substantially. Moreover, in a more general antiterrorism sense, as stressed by RAND expert Brian Jenkins, the Libyan bombing "permanently altered the equation. Any nation contemplating terrorist action against the United States after April 15, 1986, had to take into account the possibility of American retaliation."¹⁹ This obviously did not preclude all future terrorism, but it surely

¹⁶ Shaul Bakhash, "What Khomeini Did," *New York Review of Books*, 20 July 1989, 17.

¹⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Strategic Survey 1985-86* (London: IISS, 1986), 19.

¹⁸ Robert Oakley, "International Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs* 65 (America and the World 1986): 617; Bob Woodward, *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 166-67, 181-87.

¹⁹ Brian Jenkins, "Defense Against Terrorism", *Political Science Quarterly* 101 (No. 5/1986): 786.

left the American threat to retaliate much more credible than if no action had been taken in the wake of such blatant aggression as the Berlin discotheque incident.

In addition, despite the immediate dispute with the NATO allies over their unwillingness to support the bombing raids (Britain excepted), the alliance came out with a stronger multilateral antiterrorism policy. A week after the bombing raids, the European Community foreign ministers issued a resolution condemning Libya, banning arms sales to it, and pledging to strengthen intelligence sharing, enforcement, and other antiterrorism collaboration. On 5 May, at the annual western heads of state summit, the seven leaders singled out Libya and pledged maximum efforts against it. In more concrete terms, approximately 500 Libyans (diplomats, other government officials, "students") were expelled from Western Europe. Oil imports were reduced, other contracts were canceled, and official credits were suspended by a number of European countries. Thus, while not endorsing the U.S. action per se, in their actions the Europeans followed the broader U.S. antiterrorism lead.

All of this was not without its costs. One bomber and its two-man crew were lost in action. An American diplomat in the Sudan and two American and one British hostage in Lebanon were murdered in retaliation. The death of one of Qaddafi's young daughters and the allegation that this was at its core an assassination attempt tarnished the U.S. claim to high moral ground. And over time Qaddafi reared his head anew. By 1988 he once again was heavily involved in terrorism, including a series of attacks "commemorating" the second anniversary of the 14 April bombing, including one planned for New York City through a Japanese operative who was fortuitously apprehended by a state trooper on the New Jersey Turnpike.

Then in late 1988 came the revelations that Qaddafi was building a chemical weapons plant. The course that this dispute ran illustrates both the scope and the limits of coercive diplomacy-imposed foreign policy restraint. On the one hand, when the Reagan administration threatened to bomb the Rabta plant, its record of having used military force against Libya made its threat a credible one. No one doubted that it might do so again—not the West German government, one of whose companies (Imhausen-Chemie) was identified as the outside contractor and not Qaddafi, who was not seen or heard publicly for two weeks at the height of the controversy. The Reagan threat had some effectiveness without having to be executed. However, in early 1990 intelligence reports indicated that construction had resumed and the Rabta plant was now in limited production. Shortly thereafter a mysterious fire ensued that was attributed to everyone from the CIA to the Israeli Mossad to West Germany to Qaddafi as a deceptive action. But many analysts still concluded that Libya now had at least a limited chemical weapons capacity.

It may well be that, as concluded in a CIA report, "no course of action short of stimulating Qaddafi's fall will bring any significant or enduring change in Libyan policies."²⁰ Seymour Hersh and Bob Woodward and Charles Babcock have traced

²⁰ A June 1984 top secret Vulnerability Assessment prepared by the CIA cited in Tim Zimmerman,

a number of covert operations aimed at bringing Qaddafi down.²¹ A joint invasion with Egypt was considered but rejected by the Mubarak government, which then also leaked the story. And whether or not it ever was made an explicit objective, had the April 1986 bombing raids played upon existing internal tensions within the Libyan military and spurred a coup, or had Qaddafi himself been a casualty, it would have been less than happenstance.²² But none of these operations succeeded in carrying out or catalyzing internal political change. Qaddafi still was there.

*Lebanon*²³

An important distinction needs to be made between the first and the second Multinational Forces (MNF), both of which included U.S. Marines. The first MNF was sent to Lebanon soon after the June 1982 Israeli invasion with its priority objectives more as peacekeeping than coercive diplomacy.²⁴ It succeeded in its objectives and even went home early. But the peace broke down within weeks, following the assassination of newly elected Christian President Bashir Gemayel and the retaliatory Sabra and Shatila refugee camp massacres. A second contingent of U.S. Marines was then dispatched to Lebanon as part of a second MNF.

The mission of the second MNF, while purported also to be peacekeeping, turned out to be much more one of coercive diplomacy. The formal mission statement issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff talked vaguely about “establish[ing] an environment which will permit the Lebanese Armed Forces to carry out their responsibilities in the Beirut area.”²⁵ What this really meant was getting the Syrians out of Lebanon and brokering internal reconciliation among Lebanese Christians and Muslims. In this mission, however, the Marines were much less successful—and met a much more tragic fate.

Part of the problem for the Reagan coercive diplomacy strategy was Syrian intransigence. Syrian President Hafez Asad and his forces, fully rearmed by the Soviet Union, were not about to be coerced out of Lebanon by the presence of a few hundred Marines. But while Syrian resistance would have been a formidable

“The American Bombing of Libya: A Success for Coercive Diplomacy?” *Survival* 229 (May/June 1987): 207.

²¹ Seymour M. Hersh, “Target Qaddafi,” *New York Times Magazine*, 22 February 1987; Woodward, *Veil*, 364–68, 411–12, 417–20, 471–77.

²² Edward Schumacher argues that it actually had the opposite effect of “strengthening him vis-à-vis his rivals inside the government” and “ruin[ing] any remaining chances of a military revolt.” See his “The United States and Libya,” *Foreign Affairs* 65 (Winter 1986/87): 329–48.

²³ This section draws on my article, “The Lebanon War and the Soviet-American Competition: Scope and Limits of Superpower Influence” in Steven L. Spiegel, Mark A. Heller, and Jacob Goldberg, eds., *The Soviet-American Competition in the Middle East* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1988), 321–339.

²⁴ Marianne Heiberg and Johan Jorgen Holst, “Peacekeeping in Lebanon: Comparing UNIFIL and the MNF,” *Survival* 28 (September/October 1986): 399–422.

²⁵ *Report of the Department of Defense Commission on Beirut International Terrorist Act, October 23, 1983* (hereafter cited as *Long Commission Report*), 20 December (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 1983), 41.

obstacle for any U.S. strategy, the flawed approach to internal reconciliation made the situation totally intractable. The Reagan administration liked to claim that “we support no faction or religious community, but we are not neutral in our support of the legitimate government of Lebanon.”²⁶ Whatever the legalistic validity of such a position, the reality was that the United States was supporting the government of Amin Gemayel, and Gemayel was ruling more like the leader of a faction than the leader of the nation. It was in this respect that the National Salvation Front (NSF), formed with the Syrians by Druze, Shi’ite, and even disaffected Christian leaders, can be seen to have been motivated by much more than just shared opposition to the treaty signed by Gemayel with Israel. Rather, it was the product of the interaction – an all too potent synergy – between opposition to Israel, opposition to Gemayel, and increasingly opposition to the United States as the sponsor of both. Consequently, Reagan administration contentions notwithstanding, as the Pentagon’s own investigative commission later concluded, “the image of the USMNF [Marines], in the eyes of the factional militia, had become pro-Israel, pro-Phalange, and anti-Muslim.”²⁷

When U.S. forces finally withdrew following the October 1983 bombing of their barracks, all the spin control about redeployment to offshore positions could not hide the reality of retreat and defeat. But it wasn’t just that the United States had tried and failed, as in the old adage of nothing ventured, nothing gained. The prospects for Lebanese internal reconciliation were even dimmer than before. The Syrian position was even stronger. And as far as hostage takers were concerned, the United States was now a particularly inviting target. Not a single American had been taken hostage in Lebanon before July 1982; between 1984 and 1986, eighteen Americans were abducted. Moreover, as Oliver North would later recollect, it was out of desperation to free these hostages that the arms-for-hostages deal with Iran was concocted as “about the only way we can get the overall process moving.”²⁸ The rest is history.

Nicaragua

Officially, the original rationale for supporting the contras was to impose foreign policy restraint on the Sandinistas in the interest of regional security: to interdict arms supplies to the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador, to check the Sandinista military build-up, to prevent a Soviet-Cuban beachhead. It became clear over time, however, that the driving objective was less foreign policy restraint than internal political change: in Ronald Reagan’s own words, to get the Sandinistas “to say uncle.” Of course, now that the Sandinistas actually have fallen, losing the presi-

²⁶ Statement by Under Secretary of State Kenneth Dam, U.S. Congress, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Policy Options in Lebanon*, Hearings, 98th Congress, 2nd sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1984), 26.

²⁷ *Long Commission Report*, 41.

²⁸ *Report of the President’s Special Review Board* (Tower Commission), 26 February 1987 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1987), B-36.

dential election to the anti-Sandinista coalition led by Violeta Chamorro, former Reagan administration officials and other devotees of the contras have been quick to grab credit and claim vindication for the surrogate war they waged for almost a decade.²⁹ Such historical judgments require more serious and thorough analysis than provided thus far on the op-ed pages and talk shows or than can be provided in summary form herein. But in the context of the argument of this article, I want to raise three reservations about the claiming of credit for the Reagan policy.

First is the attribution problem. There are at least two other key claimants and thus alternative explanations. One is the Nicaraguan people. On 25 February 1990, they did what they might have done any number of times in the past had they been given the opportunity to vote in a genuinely free election (but which they weren't, in large part because of U.S. support and intervention on behalf of the Somoza family dynasty): they threw out a corrupt and repressive regime. The Sandinistas grossly mismanaged the economy and systematically and often brutally repressed political opposition. They also engaged in personal corruption and conspicuous consumption that may well have been the most infuriating factor for the masses in whose name the revolution had been made.³⁰ The vote in the 1990 election was anti-Sandinista, not pro-contras. The loser was Daniel Ortega. The winner was Violeta Chamorro, but not Adolfo Calero or Enrique Bermudez or Comandante Suicida.

The other strong claimant is Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sánchez and his peace plan. Granted, the military pressure from the contras was a factor in the Sandinistas' acquiescence to an election. But given that by the time of the election U.S. military aid to the contras had already been cut off for almost two years, and that U.S. domestic political realities made it highly unlikely that military aid would be resumed other than in the most extreme circumstances, this claim also is a weak one. The Arias peace plan, in contrast, provided the impetus and set the terms for the elections despite the Reagan administration having labeled it fundamentally flawed and having taken a number of actions intended to override if not undermine it.

But even if one were to accept some attribution for the Reagan policy, there remains the problem of factoring the costs incurred. There were, after all, thousands of Nicaraguans killed, wounded, displaced and whose lives were disrupted or shattered by the years of so-called low-intensity war. While there is no ready formula or model for such net assessments, they also cannot be ignored. Moreover, a realistic accounting must also include the toll taken on our own country. Here I mean less the budgetary costs than the political ones of bitter ideological warfare and especially the threats raised to the integrity of U.S. constitutional order

²⁹ Jeane Kirkpatrick, "Nicaragua: The Credit," *Washington Post*, 5 March 1990; International Security Council, "Nicaragua's Opportunity — and Ours," *New York Times*, 14 March 1990; John Felton, "In Washington, the Spin Patrol," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 3 March 1990, 678.

³⁰ William Branigan, "House Hunting Is High Politics in Managua," *Washington Post*, 16 April 1990; "In the view of one diplomat, 'corruption was the big unspoken issue' of the recent election campaign . . . 'they [Sandinista leaders] hardly bothered to hide it.'"

by the actions of Oliver North and Company. Finally and rather ironically, there were the missed opportunities along the way for progress on the regional security/foreign policy restraint issues that ostensibly were the official original rationale for supporting the contras, but for which a definite pattern of Reagan administration disinterest and evasiveness can be traced. Some examples:

- In early 1981, even before aid to the contras had begun, there was evidence (substantiated by, among others, CIA Deputy Director Bobby Inman) that other coercive measures such as the suspension of foreign aid already were leveraging the Sandinistas into cutting back their arms supplies to the Salvadoran FMLN (Farabundo Martí Liberation Front).³¹ As time went on, interdiction by the contras “became a joke,” one State Department official observed, “as the contras grew without interdicting so much as a helmet liner.”³²

- In late 1983, in the wake of the U.S. invasion of Grenada, the Sandinistas “took a series of unilateral steps addressing the security issues about which the United States had complained . . . and communicated to Washington that they . . . were seeking a reciprocal gesture.” Instead, the war party within the Reagan administration did everything it could to undermine negotiations.³³

- The following year, when the Contadora process appeared close to yielding an agreement on regional security, a National Security Council background paper boasted of having “trumped” the draft treaty.³⁴

- While some dutiful public lip service was paid to the Arias Plan (it did, after all, win its author a Nobel Peace Prize), the Reagan administration did more to punish than reward President Arias’s efforts. It held up foreign aid payments to Costa Rica, provided information that led to the arrest of an Arias political supporter on charges of drug money laundering (while ignoring allegations of even more egregious activities by contra leaders), and accused the Arias government of foreign aid mismanagement on the basis of an audit so filled with inaccuracies that the U.S. ambassador disowned it.³⁵ In sum, the Reagan claim to credit for Nicaraguan internal political change is at best a limited one, weakened by both the costs incurred and the opportunities foregone.

³¹Woodward, *Veil*, 115–22, 175–76; Robert A. Pastor, *Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987), 232–33; Christopher Dickey, *With the Contras* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 106.

³²Frank McNeil, *War and Peace in Central America* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), 153.

³³William LeoGrande, “Rollback or Containment? The United States, Nicaragua and the Search for Peace in Central America,” *International Security* 11 (Fall 1986): 102–03; Roy Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy: The Making of American Policy in Nicaragua, 1981–1987* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 88, 170–72, 211; Constantine Menges, *Inside the National Security Council* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

³⁴James Chace, “The End of the Affair?” *New York Review of Books*, 8 October 1987, 24; McNeil, *War and Peace in Central America*, 18, 31, 89, 204; LeoGrande, “Rollback or Containment?”

³⁵McNeil, *War and Peace in Central America*, 18, 189, 204.

POLICY OBJECTIVES AND THE CONSTRAINTS ON COERCIVE DIPLOMACY

Usability of Military Options

The military requisite of coercive diplomacy as defined by Alexander George is that a state has the capacity to wield force in a “controlled, discriminating manner” while also raising the adversary’s fear of unacceptable escalation. The foreign policy restraint objective has two advantages in this regard. First, as a more limited objective in political terms, it has a greater proportionality with the limited applications of military force. As George also states,

the task of coercion is determined or set by the magnitude of the opponent’s motivation not to comply and that this, in turn, is a function of his perception of what is demanded of him. Asking very little of an opponent makes it easier for him to permit himself to be coerced. Conversely, demanding a great deal of an opponent . . . makes the task of coercing him all the more difficult.³⁶

In contrast, there is a disproportionality between the limited coercive means available and the more maximal political objective of remaking the internal politics of another country.

Second is the tactical advantage of a more favorable balance of relative vulnerability, which is defined as the ability to limit the exposure of American forces while being able to strategically target and expose the adversary’s vulnerabilities. The foreign policy restraint objective is more readily pursued from a distance through surprise attacks and other limited forms of direct engagement. But the internal political change objective tends to require more open-ended commitments, either directly with American forces or through surrogates. Moreover, when it is power and not just policies at stake, whatever an adversary’s vulnerabilities may be, the adversary is likely to be infused with a heightened willingness to bear the costs in the name of survival.³⁷

The cases bear out these advantages and disadvantages. The success in getting the Soviet troops out of Afghanistan was possible only because usable military options existed. Proportionality was established at the outset by the American position of support for the forces of nationalism against the foreign intervener. It was sustained by, among other things, the handling of the Geneva negotiations in a manner that avoided backing the Soviets into a corner or stripping them of

³⁶ George, *Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, 225, 24–25. Nor, for that matter, is this only true for a military mode of coercion. In their study of economic sanctions, for example, Gary Hufbauer and Jeffrey Schott found a substantially higher success rate in cases involving “modest policy changes” (41 percent) than with major policy changes (26 percent), *Economic Sanctions Reconsidered: History and Current Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Institute of International Economics, 1985), 79–81.

³⁷ Andrew J. R. Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict” in Klaus Knorr, ed., *Power, Strategy and Security: A World Politics Reader* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 126–51; Steven Rosen, “War, Power and the Willingness to Suffer” in Bruce Russett, ed., *Peace, War and Numbers* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1972), 167–84.

all pretense of saving face, so that (paraphrasing George's terms) their perception of what was being demanded of them was not overbearing. The favorable balance of relative vulnerability came from the U.S. ability to limit its own exposure while, especially by 1986–87 with the Stinger missiles, effectively targeting the Soviet's vulnerabilities. "Before [the] Stinger," according to a classified U.S. Army report, "Soviet fixed and rotary wing aircraft always won the day." But armed with Stingers the mujaheddin downed 269 aircraft in 340 firings (a formidable 79 percent average), weakening the Soviets' ability to cut into the resistance's supply routes, attack their mountain strongholds, or provide air support for government outposts under attack.³⁸ The wound about which Gorbachev had expressed concern even before the Stingers now was bleeding profusely.

The same military options, however, have proven much less usable for the internal political change objective. In their effort to seize power from the Najibullah government, the mujaheddin no longer could rely on the guerrilla tactics they used so well to target Soviet vulnerabilities. They now had to fight in the more conventional style of an army trying to take cities such as Jalalabad, at which they were inexperienced, poorly trained, and themselves vulnerable. Moreover, they increasingly resorted to sieges, indiscriminate shellings, and other tactics that have alienated the civilian population. Both proportionality and relative vulnerability thus shifted unfavorably.

In Nicaragua, the uncle-saying objective to which the Reagan administration aspired was quite disproportionate to the limited military means at its disposal. The desire to acquire greater military means than Congress was prepared to appropriate, rather than scale back its political objectives, led the Reagan administration into the questionable and in some instances unconstitutional practices of Iran-contra arms dealings, of independent fund raising in wealthy conservative circles, and of quid pro quos with third party governments. The usable military options problem, though, was much more endemic than just a shortage of funds. Levels of funding aside, the contras showed themselves to be quite unreliable and ineffective as a military force. After one of his frequent trips to the field, Oliver North's courier Robert Owen complained that "there are few of the so-called leaders . . . who really care about the boys in the field. This has become a business to them." More aid, Owen told North, will be "like pouring money down a sinkhole."³⁹ As to the balance of relative vulnerability, American exposure was limited in that troops never were committed. But through the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, the preparation of an "assassination" manual, the military build up in Honduras, the 1986 crash of American mercenary Eugene Hasenfus's supply plane, and numerous other incidents and activities of the CIA and their operatives, the American position was all too exposed. Thus, while the Sandinistas definitely had their vulnerabilities, the contras and the Reagan administration were not particularly adept at targeting them.

³⁸ *Washington Post*, 5 July 1989.

³⁹ Chace, "The End of the Affair?" 30.

In Lebanon there also was a serious disproportion between the type of military commitments and both the nature and the depth of the political problems. This was true even with regard to the very idea that a program of professional training would be sufficient to depoliticize the Lebanese army. As Ze'ev Schiff has observed:

The Lebanese Army can play a part in consolidating the power of the government only if a prior political agreement can be reached between the central government and at least one of the major confessional groups, in addition to the Christians. History shows that without that agreement the army crumbles when asked to fight either Shiites or Druze.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, U.S. Defense Department officials contended that “dealing with Lebanese factional politics was not their job; they were simply to train the Lebanese to be good soldiers.” State Department officials also begged off, claiming “they felt unqualified to do more than urge the Lebanese in a general sense to reconcile their factional politics.”⁴¹

Moreover, the balance of relative vulnerability was immensely unfavorable. On the one side was an adversary(ies) who had the benefits both of terrorist tactics and of the willingness to sacrifice imbued by their fundamentalist zealotry. On the other side were the U.S. Marines at fixed positions while being limited to peacetime rules of engagement and carrying out an uncertain mission. Their original deployment had proceeded from the premise that they would be operating in a “relatively benign environment.” Long before the 23 October 1983 barracks bombing, though, it should have been clear, as stressed in the Long Commission report, that “the environment could no longer be characterized as peaceful.” The terrorism against the Marines was “tantamount to an act of war,” yet they still were not “trained, organized, staffed or supported to deal effectively with the terrorist threat.”⁴² Thus, when the terrorist truck bomber attacked the Marine barracks in the middle of the night, he encountered sentries who, in accordance with their peacetime rules of engagement, were carrying unloaded weapons—exposed and vulnerable.

“A floating Beirut” was the dire warning sounded when the reflagging and naval operations first began in the Persian Gulf. But while the military operations did have quite a few flaws (not the least of which was lumbering into the gulf without minesweepers), this was another instance in which military force did prove usable for a foreign policy restraint objective. Proportionality was maintained by keeping the use of force limited largely to retaliatory and preventive attacks, and by targeting primarily offshore and coastal sites of military and economic value but with minimal civilian presence. The tactical advantage was solidified by the cooperative deployments by other western navies, minesweepers included. By 30 September 1987, some seventy European naval vessels had been deployed to the gulf by Britain, France, Italy, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Each of these fleets was operating

⁴⁰ Ze'ev Schiff, “Dealing with Syria,” *Foreign Policy* 55 (Summer 1984): 109–110.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, 11 March 1984.

⁴² *Long Commission Report*, 39–40, 87–92.

under its own national command, but together they amounted to the largest international fleet assembled since the Korean War.

The balance of relative vulnerability also was quite favorable. The war with Iraq had been going badly for Iran for over a year, with the Basra offensive in particular having gained some land but at the expense of 45,000 casualties. The Iranian economy was in deep trouble. Crude oil exports were down to less than one million barrels a day; in fact, Iran was having to import some petroleum products. National income, at \$15 billion as recently as 1985, had plummeted to \$6.5 billion. Reports emanating from within Iran talked about foreign exchange reserves being depleted, unemployment and inflation both running high, and some food being rationed.⁴³ Thus, while the costs the United States incurred were not inconsequential, they still were far less than those borne by a nation already at war for over seven years, with staggering death tolls and an economy in deep crisis. Even the Ayatollah Khomeini could not continue to muster the fervor necessary to sustain the will to bear such costs.

In the Libyan case American air power demonstrated its usability. Prior to the April 1986 bombing raids, the Reagan administration flexed American air muscle against Libya. In 1981, in a skirmish over Libya's claim of a 100-mile boundary for its territorial waters, two F-14s shot down two Libyan Su-22s over the Gulf of Sidra. On 14 March 1986, as tensions were increasing over terrorism, three aircraft deliberately were sent over Qaddafi's proclaimed "line of death." On 24-25 March Libya launched six SAMs at American planes and sent its patrol boats to challenge U.S. ships. None were hit, but the American bombers took out a missile site at Sirte and the naval task force sunk a high speed missile patrol boat, killing fifty-six. The April 1986 bombing raids were of a much greater coercive magnitude, yet still kept controlled and limited. "The results of the strike," the Department of Defense reported, "met the established objectives. . . . [A]ll targets were hit and all targets received very appreciable damage." The targets were specific facilities in Tripoli and Benghazi revealed by intelligence to be key parts of Qaddafi's infrastructure for terrorist training and operations. Collateral damage to civilian areas was not totally avoided, but the extensive precautions taken by the mission planners kept it limited.⁴⁴

The balance of relative vulnerability also was a highly conducive one. The attack hit Libya at a point of close to maximal exposure. Its oil earnings had fallen to \$5 billion (1980 = \$22 billion). This not only left it with minimal leverage over western oil importers, but also the budget cuts necessitated by the fall in oil earnings had among other things fed tensions within the Libyan military. Qaddafi's plethora of conflicts with such other Arab states as Egypt, Tunisia, and Chad, as well as strains in his relations with Syria, left him somewhat isolated among his own

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *The Persian Gulf: Stakes and Risks*, Current Policy No. 963, 29 May 1987.

⁴⁴ "Report of the U.S. Department of Defense on the Bombing of Libya" 8 May 1986, reprinted in *Survival*, September/October 1986, 451-53.

brethren. His relations with the Soviet Union also were strained. Gorbachev had refused to promise aid in the event of a U.S. attack. And when the U.S. did attack, while the Soviet technical personnel and their commanders picked up early warnings, they took care of their own vulnerability by evacuating their positions at Libyan air defense installations. But they didn't bother to warn Qaddafi.⁴⁵

International Legitimacy

A second differential constraint is the stronger claim the foreign policy restraint objective can make to international legitimacy. Principles of nonaggression, national self-determination, and the rights of sovereignty — however abused in practice they have been — are the closest the international system has to a universal set of rules and norms. A coercive diplomacy strategy mounted to restrain an aggressor nation in defense of these basic principles, therefore, can draw upon historical tradition as well as canons of international law for its justification. In addition to the importance in its own right of the moral authority that comes with international legitimacy, even more important is that in practical terms this can convert into the greater coercive potential of a broad-based international coalition, which brings to bear the authority and resources of other countries and of international institutions, along with those of the United States.

The Reagan administration, however, did not see it this way. It assumed that there could be no higher calling than to rid the world of Marxist-Leninist regimes and others it deemed illegitimate. This was the essence of the Reagan Doctrine and its “mission” to “nourish and defend freedom and democracy and to communicate these ideals everywhere we can.”⁴⁶ Internationally, however, there were few other subscribers to this view, even among other western liberal democratic societies. Part of the disaffection was that few other countries so readily share the ABC blanket criterion — anything but communism — for regime legitimacy. Even more fundamental was the concern, as identified by Robert Tucker, that this risked “subordinat[ing] the traditional bases of international order to a particular vision of legitimacy.”⁴⁷

Three indicators can be used to compare the cases in terms of international legitimacy: support at the United Nations, support within the western alliance, and support from states in the affected region. Here too the cases bear out the contrast.

On Afghanistan, to an extent quite unusual for the time, at least so far as the Soviet invasion was concerned, the United States had strong support at the UN. Within weeks the General Assembly passed by 104–18 a resolution condemning

⁴⁵ Schumacher, “The United States and Libya,” 334; Oakley, “International Terrorism,” 618.

⁴⁶ Ronald Reagan, “State of the Union 1985,” Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents, vol. 21, no. 6, 1985, 145–46.

⁴⁷ Robert W. Tucker, *Intervention and the Reagan Doctrine* (New York: Council on Religion and International Affairs, 1985), 13.

the Soviet invasion and calling for a Soviet troop withdrawal. Similar resolutions passed by comparable margins in ensuing years. The UN Human Rights Commission went even further, charging the Soviets with “systematic brutality” and “a situation approaching genocide.”⁴⁸ The western allies provided a moderate degree of support, collaborating with some economic sanctions and joining in tough declaratory communiqués issued by NATO and at the annual heads-of-state summits. Much stronger support came from regional actors. The Islamic Conference was both vocal and active in its opposition to the Soviet invasion. Key countries such as Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt went much further and played active roles in supporting the mujaheddin. So did the People’s Republic of China and, on its own, so did Iran.

In Nicaragua, the United States never could lay claim to any substantial degree of international legitimacy. The UN General Assembly passed resolution after resolution condemning American policy. The United States had its veto in the Security Council, but it still lost face when, as in 1984, thirteen of fifteen Security Council members voted for a resolution condemning the U.S. mining of Nicaraguan harbors. Britain abstained. The western allies were so unsupportive that there were widespread concerns about, as one book on the subject was titled, “Central America as a European-American issue.”⁴⁹ Nor was there any legitimation of the U.S. strategy from within the region itself. Beyond the specifics of their respective peace plans, what the Contadora initiative and the Arias Plan were about was the rejection by Latin Americans of U.S. dominance of their region.⁵⁰

In Lebanon, unlike other Middle Eastern multilateral forces such as UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) or UNTSO (United Nations Truce Supervision Organization), the MNF never had the UN imprimatur. But the legitimacy of MNF I was not called into question because its mandate and mission were “judged worthwhile by all parties,” including the Lebanese government, the PLO, key regional allies such as Egypt and Jordan, and the NATO allies (France and Italy also sent troops as part of the MNF).⁵¹ MNF II benefited at the outset from the success of MNF I as an evenhanded peacekeeping force and from the widespread fear in the wake of the Gemayel (Bashir) assassination and the Sabra and Shatila massacres. But through its support for the Gemayel (Amin) government,

⁴⁸ On Soviet human rights abuses in Afghanistan, see Edward Girardet, “Migratory Genocide” and Jeri Laber and Barnett Rubin, “The War in the City,” *New Republic*, 4 March 1985, 13–18; U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs, *Soviet Influence on Afghan Youth*, Special Report No. 139, February 1986.

⁴⁹ Andrew J. Pierre, ed., *Third World Instability: Central America as a European-American Issue* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1985).

⁵⁰ “We Central American leaders,” Arias stated, “have to begin to solve our own problems.” Of a meeting between Arias and Reagan, a senior Costa Rican government official recounted: “I don’t think anyone had ever told Ronald Reagan to his face that no respectable country publicly supports the contras . . . and that the United States is alone on this issue.” James LeMoyné, “Arias: Whom Can He Trust?” *New York Times Magazine*, 10 January 1988, 69.

⁵¹ Heiberg and Holst, “Peacekeeping in Lebanon”, 407–08.

and particularly the military aid and training provided to the Lebanese Armed Forces, the United States no longer could make a sustainable claim in any eyes other than its own to being an honest, impartial broker. The American role consequently was transformed from one of “disinterested peacekeeping” to “partisan intervention” for which it could not credibly claim international legitimacy.⁵²

The Libyan case requires some reading between the lines and separating of actions from rhetoric. The General Assembly did pass a resolution condemning the U.S. bombing, but the overall reaction within the UN was much tamer and more pro forma than might have been expected. Among the western allies, while only Britain was willing to support the actual bombing mission, a week later the European Community issued a resolution condemning Libya, banning arms sales to it, and pledging to strengthen intelligence sharing, enforcement, and other antiterrorism collaboration. Approximately 500 Libyans (diplomats, other government officials, “students”) were expelled from Western Europe. Oil imports were reduced, other contracts were canceled, and many official credits were suspended. Thus, while not endorsing the U.S. action per se, the Europeans followed the broader U.S. policy lead. As to the Arab world, while allowing for a certain amount of obligatory denunciation of the United States, as one study concluded, “reaction to the U.S. bombing . . . has been surprisingly mild.”⁵³ Both the Arab League and OPEC rejected Qaddafi’s call for economic sanctions against the United States. Nor did any Arab state break relations with the United States.

The United States also was able to claim substantial international legitimacy for its 1987–1988 role in the Persian Gulf. UN Security Council Resolution 522 (passed 1 June 1984) reaffirmed the freedom of the seas and condemned Iran for its attacks on commercial ships. Resolution 598 (20 July 1987), which actually was the eighth time the Security Council had passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire, pointed its threat of an arms embargo at Iran. Important support also came from the western allies, who insisted upon keeping their actions outside of the NATO framework and under their own autonomous national commands, but who nevertheless sent their own naval vessels to the gulf. As to regional actors, the Iranian threat was very real to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates who banded together in 1981 to form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). They stepped up their military cooperation with Iraq and lent it an estimated \$30 billion.⁵⁴ Egypt also provided military and political support. And the Arab League (with dissent only from Syria and Libya) passed its own series of resolutions condemning Iran.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 399–400.

⁵³ Robert Satloff and Jonathan Barkey, “Arab Reaction to the U.S. Air Strikes Against Libya,” *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 9 May 1986 (mimeo).

⁵⁴ Richard M. Preece, “The Iran-Iraq War: Implications for U.S. Policy,” *Congressional Research Service, Issue Brief*, 14 October 1987, 14.

Domestic Political Opposition

If consensus could always be manufactured through public relations campaigns, then it would not matter whether one policy objective was more inherently disposed to low domestic constraints than another. Like Harry Truman and Dean Acheson in the selling of the Truman Doctrine, the right words and framing of an issue could evoke support even from a reluctant Congress and isolationist public. But precisely because of Ronald Reagan's well-deserved reputation as the Great Communicator, the limits of his capacity to forge consensus on issues like Nicaragua is all the more significant. Today the Congress is less automatically deferential, the public is much more attentive, and the executive branch itself is less strictly unitary than in the past.⁵⁵ Whether or not this is a positive or negative development for American foreign policy is a separate question. The relevant point here is that because domestic constraints are that much more prevalent than in the past, the inherent dispositions that different types of issues carry toward higher or lower constraints are that much more important.

Public Opinion. In terms of public opinion it is useful to apply William Schneider's distinction between valence and position issues.⁵⁶ Valence issues involve threats to shared basic values and thus tend to evoke consensual reactions, while position issues allow for legitimate alternative preferences on values and thus a more divisive politics. The pursuit of foreign policy restraint by an aggressor state is more likely to be treated as a valence issue for two reasons. First, the threat is much clearer, present, and dangerous: blatant violations of basic American principles such as national self-determination (Afghanistan), immediate threats to vital American geopolitical and economic interests (Persian Gulf reflagging), and direct aggression against American citizens (Libya), as compared to keeping somebody else's peace (Lebanon) and deposing the government of a tiny country because of a still hypothetical threat (Nicaragua).

Second, as evidenced by the more usable military options, the foreign policy restraint objective is more apt to allow for assertiveness without extended involvement and for shows of strength without open-ended commitments. As such, it embodies what Schneider assesses as the pervasive desire of Americans in the 1980s for "peace and strength, yes; involvement, no".⁵⁷ Peace and strength through shows of strength that don't entangle — either because of their indirectness (Afghanistan)

⁵⁵ Thomas E. Mann, ed., *A Question of Balance: The President, Congress and Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1990); John H. Aldrich, John L. Sullivan, and Eugene Borghida, "Foreign Affairs and Issue Voting: Do Presidential Candidates 'Waltz Before a Blind Audience'?" *American Political Science Review* 83 (March 1989): 123-42; David C. Kozak and James M. Keagle, *Bureaucratic Politics and National Security: Theory and Practice* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1988).

⁵⁶ William Schneider, "Conservatism, Not Interventionism: Trends in Foreign Policy Opinion, 1974-82" in Kenneth A. Oye, Donald Rothchild, and Robert J. Lieber, eds., *Eagle Defiant: United States: Foreign Policy in the 1980s* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1983), 39-40.

⁵⁷ William Schneider, "'Rambo' and Reality: Having It Both Ways" in Kenneth A. Oye, Donald Rothchild and Robert J. Lieber, *Eagle Resurgent: The Reagan Era in American Foreign Policy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1987), 45.

or their quickness (Libya)—were far preferable to those that did entangle (Lebanon) or risked extended involvement (Nicaragua). The Persian Gulf reflagging case was more direct and less quick-and-out, and thus could be expected to show greater tension within public opinion, although not nearly as much as the more direct and entangling Lebanon commitment.

Public opinion poll data substantiate these propositions.⁵⁸ On a cross-case basis, public support was highest in the cases of Libya (average support score of 65.2 percent even in prebombing polls) and the Persian Gulf (55.5 percent), and lowest for Nicaragua (27.3 percent when asked about contra aid, 19.7 percent when asked about a U.S. invasion). On an intracase basis, when questions were asked disaggregating foreign policy restraint and internal political change objectives, the pattern is further corroborated. In the Libya case, questions about overthrowing or assassinating Qaddafi elicited an average score of only 29 percent. In the Nicaragua case, those questions asking specifically about using force for regional military deployments to deter Nicaraguan threats to other countries (35.2 percent), and an invasion of Nicaragua if it allowed a Soviet missile base (45 percent)—for foreign policy restraint—got higher levels of support.

Congress. The usual portrayal of legislative-executive politics is of the assertive Reagan administration pushing to “stand tall” and show that “America is back” vs. the retreatist Congress, reflexively pulling back from using force. In fact the pattern was not nearly so singular.

On Afghanistan it’s often overlooked that Congress repeatedly pushed the Reagan administration to take a harder line. Initially the Reagan administration had kept aid and other covert assistance to the mujaheddin at the relatively low levels set by the Carter administration. The first major aid increase was in late 1983 at the initiative of Representative Charles H. Wilson, a conservative Texas Democrat, through a secret amendment to the Defense Department appropriations bill reallocating \$40 million to the CIA for the Afghan operation. In fiscal year (FY) 1985 Congress nearly tripled the Reagan administration’s aid request. The next year Congress set up its own Special Task Force on Afghanistan, chaired by the staunchly conservative Senator Gordon Humphrey (R.-N.H.).

One might have thought the foil was Jimmy Carter the way Humphrey used the task force to play to the press through hearings that “embarrassed the Reagan administration by disclosing one shortcoming after another in U.S. military and humanitarian aid programs.”⁵⁹ And when in late 1987 news reports indicated that the State Department was considering conceding to Soviet demands for a cessation of U.S. aid as part of the withdrawal accords, the Senate voted unanimously for a Humphrey resolution opposing any such concession.

On Nicaragua, in contrast, the Congress had to be pulled kicking and screaming

⁵⁸ For a fuller discussion, see Bruce W. Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public: American Opinion on the Use of Force in the Third World in the 1980s,” paper presented at the 1990 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, California.

⁵⁹ *Washington Post*, 12 February 1989.

to vote for aid to the contras. Only once, in 1985, did it fully grant the administration's contra aid request. It surely never gave them more than they wanted, and it repeatedly gave them less. And at key points in 1984 and 1988, it cut the contras off almost totally. Then, of course, the Iran-contra hearings, to a greater extent than any scandal since Watergate, put the administration in the docket with the Congress as the inquisitor.

A comparison of the debates over the War Powers Act for Lebanon and the Persian Gulf reflagging cuts in the same direction. On Lebanon, Congress was willing to go along with the Marines' deployment, but only as part of a carefully crafted agreement that technically stopped short of a formal invocation of the War Powers Act, but made the commitment politically subject to congressional renewal or termination. Support thus was tenuous and tentative, ready to be tipped in the other direction by some unforeseen event, which is precisely what happened with the Marine barracks bombing. With the Persian Gulf reflagging and naval operations, the opposition in Congress never could muster the critical mass to take constraining action. The House passed a ninety-day delay on reflagging in early July 1987, but the Senate didn't follow suit. A number of senators tried in a variety of ways to invoke the War Powers Act or to pass other restrictive measures. But only the Byrd-Warner amendment, a measure loaded down in ambiguities and without any real effect, ever passed. Even then, this time it was the House which failed to act.⁶⁰

In the Libyan case the president consulted some congressional leaders prior to the 14 April bombing. The consultation was more informational than advisory, but both the Democrats and Republicans assured him of their personal support. Some voices of protest came from liberal Democrats, but even many liberals raced for the syndicated television talk shows to bash Qaddafi. Congress never seriously considered any condemnatory or restrictive action.

Executive Branch Unity. Here too the contrast is consistent. As long as the objective was Soviet withdrawal, few if any stories were written about intra-executive branch conflict over Afghanistan. The State Department, Defense Department, and CIA all worked quite well together, both at senior policy-making and operational levels. Since early 1989, however, as the Bush policy has become ensnared in the traps of engineering internal political change, this unity has started to break down.⁶¹

Over Nicaragua, however, the Reagan executive branch was ridden with conflict from the start. The battles were fought not only between departments but in particular within the State Department. As one example, Philip Habib, appointed special negotiator only a few months earlier, resigned out of frustration with both

⁶⁰ Robert A. Katzmann, "War Powers: Toward a New Accommodation" in Mann, *A Question of Balance*, 35-69.

⁶¹ See, for example, David B. Ottaway, "U.S. Reconsiders Policy on Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, 24 November 1989; Elaine Sciolino, "U.S. Divided on Soviet Afghan Stand," *New York Times*, 16 December 1989; Bill McCollum, "The CIA Has Bungled It," *Washington Post*, 10 September 1989.

the political obstruction and personal condemnation he encountered within the administration for his efforts to treat peace talks as something more than just a way of providing “a plausible negotiating track” for public relations purposes. Then, of course, there were the operations of Oliver North and his minions, intended to go around not only Congress but also normal channels within the State Department and the CIA.⁶²

In the Lebanon case, revealingly, perhaps the most scathing criticism of the intervention came from within the military, in particular from the Long Commission. Secretaries George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger waged a very public debate, which grew out of Lebanon and came to involve the more general issue of the use of force. Shultz strongly opposed withdrawing the Marines from Beirut, especially after the barracks bombing. “If we are driven out of Lebanon,” he argued, “our role in the world is that much weakened everywhere.” At stake were America’s responsibilities as the world’s leading “defender of freedom, justice and peace,” responsibilities from which “we cannot walk away . . . without paying a moral and a political price.” Secretary Weinberger rejected this argument both in its specific and general forms. He played a key role in President Reagan’s decision in February 1984 to withdraw the Marines under the ostensibly credible guise of an “offshore deployment.” And while stopping well short of rejecting coercive diplomacy, later in the year he sounded “a note of caution” in laying out a series of preconditions for the use of military force.⁶³

In contrast, both Weinberger and Shultz supported both the bombing of Libya and the Persian Gulf reflagging naval deployment. For Weinberger they both met his tests. For Shultz they were cases par excellence of his broader argument. The criticisms of the Persian Gulf operation, of which there were many within the executive branch, largely were about tactics and not questions of the use of force in itself. Thus, while well short of pure harmony, the intra-administration divisions in both the deliberations and execution of policy when force was being used primarily to coerce foreign policy restraint were much more confined and controlled.

CONCLUSIONS

What, then, are the conclusions to be drawn from the Reagan coercive diplomacy record? And what are the implications of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait? In one sense my analysis does affirm the scope of the power and influence that the United

⁶² Gutman, *Banana Diplomacy*; McNeil, *Reality or Illusion*; LeoGrande, “Rollback or Containment?”; Menges, *Inside the NSC*, *New York Times*, 14 July 1986; U.S. Congress, Senate Select Committee on Secret Military Assistance to Iran and the Nicaraguan Opposition and House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran, *Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair*, 100th Congress, 1st sess., 1987.

⁶³ *Department of State Bulletin*, November 1983, 26, and December 1983, 44–45; among Weinberger’s tests are the need to be willing to employ sufficient forces to win militarily, a clear definition of the objectives which force is to serve, a reliable ally and strong and consistent public support. Speech to the National Press Club, 28 November 1984, as reported in *New York Times*, 30 November 1984.

States still has for containing aggression. The Afghan mujaheddin had many supporters, but it's difficult to imagine them having forced the Soviet Red Army back across its border without U.S. support—diplomatic and military, even more than financial. With Qaddafi there was no one else willing to take up the challenge. Similarly, with Iran in the Persian Gulf, while there were many other actors, the American role appears to have been the crucial one.

The modalities by which force was brought to bear differed in all three of these cases: in effect, one was by land, one by sea, one by air. But in all three instances the use of force was kept limited, controlled, and discriminating. The costs imposed on the adversaries were substantial in their own right, as well as credibly foreboding of even higher costs that could follow. *Yet the strategies remained fundamentally political ones.* In both the Afghanistan and Persian Gulf reflagging cases, the use of military force did not stand on its own but was linked to diplomatic efforts to negotiate settlements. Both the coercive and the diplomatic components, not just one or the other, were at work. In the Libyan case there was no such diplomatic process, but even here the use of military force was intended more to persuade than defeat. When we speak of effectiveness, therefore, we are speaking of force combined with diplomacy, not force on its own. The Soviets were not about to withdraw from Afghanistan without at minimum the face-saving cover that a negotiated settlement provided. Nor could Iran have been expected to surrender to Iraq, which had started the war.

The cases also showed that uses of force by the United States do not inherently have insurmountable problems of international legitimacy. Support would be too strong a word, but acceptance fits. The United Nations never endorsed per se American aid to the mujaheddin, or the Kuwaiti reflagging, or surely not the bombing of Libya. But the first two were accepted on balance as complements to, if not de facto operational extensions of, UN resolutions. The UN criticism of the Libyan bombing was rather pro forma, a dutiful nod more than a vehement protest. With the NATO allies, the broader concern about keeping the alliance's mission confined to the North Atlantic region, as well as some specific policy differences, precluded formal collaboration or specific endorsement. But the allies still managed in the Afghanistan, Libya, and Persian Gulf reflagging cases (and initially in Lebanon) to express general support for the objectives being pursued and to find ways to work with the United States. Key countries within the respective regions provided even greater support. And they did so not just as American clients, as was more the case in the 1950s, but for their own self-interested reasons. This made them more independent, often to the displeasure of the Reagan administration, but it also gave the United States a much stronger claim to international legitimacy.

At home, support for coercive diplomacy was shown to be not out of the question, but to depend on its purpose. Support was most tenuous in the Persian Gulf reflagging case because of concern about the costs and risks of the military operations. But here too it still held. Nor were "divided government" and the partisan and institutional competitions which are its outgrowth an excessive constraint. Congress and the president found constructive ways to work together. The Amer-

ican public was supportive, but not blindly so. The executive branch avoided many of the pitfalls of bureaucratic politics. The American political system, in sum, showed itself not to be as broke as so often accused.

None of these conclusions should be taken too far. Three limiting conditions are to be noted. First, the claim of effectiveness needs to be tempered by the distinction between immediate and generalized foreign policy restraint. As both the Persian Gulf-Iran and Libya cases demonstrate, the achieving of the one does not necessarily lead to the other. A key part of the problem here is the extent to which sustained conflict with the United States has domestic political utility within the adversary state. This in a sense parallels the argument about domestic constraints within U.S. policy. In the one it is a matter of the domestic political will to carry out coercive diplomacy; in the other it is a matter of the domestic political will to resist it. The common point is that foreign policy strategy is not exclusively a matter of calculations of interstate interactions, be they military or diplomatic. All the military calculations may line up, all the rules for effective negotiation may be followed, but if the leaders of the adversary have an interest in manipulating and fomenting the image of the United States as an enemy, they will continue to do so. The threat posed thus can be transformed from a compellent for compliance to a basis for continued resistance and aggression.

Second, it may be that the immediate objective is achieved but in the process the strategy is distorted in ways that create new threats—as did the Reagan and Bush administrations with their overtilting toward Iraq. Neither the failure to oppose Iraq's use of chemical weapons nor the near total relaxation of antiproliferation controls on trade with Iraq were necessary parts of the anti-Iran strategy. Nor were the exceedingly soft diplomatic signals sent to Saddam Hussein by key Bush administration officials in late July 1990 at the same time that he had escalated his rhetoric, made explicit threats, and mobilized his troops and tanks. Coercive diplomacy could have worked against Iran without these excesses and failures against Iraq.

Third, the extent of foreign policy restraint is not to be exaggerated. Coercive diplomacy is by definition a strategy of limited means. In all of the Reagan era cases, the force used was limited. The same has been true for the Bush administration's initial response against Iraq. However, the decisions taken by the Bush administration in early November 1990 to double the military deployment and move to an offensive military strategy indicated a belief that this was a case in which the adversary was so resistant that limited force would not suffice. Whether or not a continued strategy of limited force could have worked will never be known. Given the Bush administration's assessment of Saddam Hussein, it believed the only viable strategies were to escalate the degree of force to the outer edges of a coercive diplomacy strategy (the military build-up, the 15 January 1991 ultimatum) or, ultimately, to go to war.

The more severe constraint on what coercive diplomacy can achieve concerns the engineering of internal political change. The central point is not that the Reagan policies failed, but that coercive diplomacy as a foreign policy strategy has intrinsic

disadvantages when put to this purpose. There still may be situations like Grenada and Panama, where it is possible to mount a military operation to overthrow a government. But those are unique cases from which it would be dangerous to generalize and which involve a quite separate strategy from coercive diplomacy. In Lebanon, American casualties were substantial. In Nicaragua, while others bore the casualties, the United States had the albatross of an open-ended commitment. In post-Soviet withdrawal Afghanistan, military force has not been nearly so usable as it was for getting the Soviets to withdraw.

These cases also show how and why the remaking of governments lacks international legitimacy. In Lebanon, the United States forfeited the legitimacy it started with as it transformed its strategy from honest broker/peacekeeper to supporter/sponsor of the Gemayel regime. In Nicaragua, the Reagan policy never could credibly claim any significant international legitimacy. The specific objective of overthrowing the Sandinistas and the more general precedent of making self-determination selectively applicable only to certain types of political systems as determined unilaterally by the United States were rejected by the western allies, by the countries in the region, and by the United Nations.

Finally, the domestic constraints, especially on Nicaragua policy, have to be seen as commentaries on the policies themselves. It's not that Congress, the American public, or the professionals within the State Department won't let the president use military force. One might even argue that these actors and institutions showed a much shrewder, more discriminating — yes, more realistic — sense of strategy than the Reagan administration. But even leaving such policy judgments aside, the objective fact is that broad political support is much less possible for efforts to overthrow, destabilize, or otherwise remake governments. This cannot be equated as a systemic malfunction. It is politics as it is supposed to work in the American political system: checks and balances, the separation of powers, and public debate over what United States policy should be.

That this is a dilemma is not to be denied. The kinds of governments other states have does affect Americans and American interests. Other foreign policy strategies, however, are necessary. Coercive diplomacy has its scope. It also has its limits. The realization of both together, but neither alone, is crucial to a truly realistic foreign policy.*

* Much of this article was written while a guest scholar at the Brookings Institution and with the financial support of an Advanced Research Fellowship in Foreign Policy Studies from the Social Science Research Council. An earlier version was presented at the 1989 annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in Atlanta, Georgia. Thanks to Clinton Brass for his research assistance and to Larry Berman, Alexander George, Charles Kupchan, Ariel Levite, Miroslav Nincic, and Donald Rothchild for their valuable comments.