

Washington: Is somebody starting to wake up?

by Richard Cohen in Washington, D.C.

Some time during the week of Oct. 17, someone woke up in Washington. Sources close to the White House believe that before the Oct. 23 massacre of U.S. and French troops in Beirut, two events precipitated what quickly evolved into a drastic shift in the Reagan administration's strategic policy.

The first event involved the successful Syrian effort to torpedo Lebanese reconciliation talks scheduled to be held at Beirut National Airport. Senior White House sources had told me that Syrian acquiescence to the reconciliation talks, considered a desperate necessity by administration planners at the time, had been bought by White House pledges to accede to a disastrous de facto partition of Lebanon.

Indeed, in the period leading up to Soviet-encouraged Syrian efforts to pull the rug out from under the fragile reconciliation process, administration officials, intoxicated by promises coming through Henry A. Kissinger's back channels to Damascus, believed that Syria could readily be pried from its Soviet connections and could even be used as a liaison with Khomeini's Teheran.

On the night of Oct. 19, in a nationally televised press conference, Reagan sent out the first signals that a shift in policy was in the offing by openly attacking Syrian sabotage.

Grenada: breaking the web of controls

The second event, which followed on the heels of Reagan's press conference, was the coup against the prime minister of Grenada, Maurice Bishop, who was summarily executed. As President Reagan was to later report in an Oct. 27 address to the nation, "In the last year or so, Prime Minister Bishop gave indications he would like to have better relations

with the United States. He even made a trip to our country and met with senior officials of the White House and the State Department." Several White House sources have confirmed that Bishop held a three-hour meeting with former National Security Adviser Judge William Clark, and, according to unconfirmed reports, Bishop had fashioned a deal whereby he would gradually disengage from his Soviet and Cuban connections. Washington intelligence sources unanimously say that Bishop's ouster was orchestrated out of the Soviet embassy in Grenada.

My sources believe that the crucial decisions were made sometime during Saturday, Oct. 22. On Oct. 25, nineteen hundred U.S. Marines and Rangers backed up by 300 troops from six Caribbean nations invaded Grenada—and the pro-peasement elements of the news media were unable to blow the whistle ahead of time. By the night of Oct. 27, virtually all military objectives of the invading forces had been reached. The invading forces had captured 600 Cubans, mostly soldiers, 30 Soviet advisers, and a massive armory of weapons and sophisticated military communications equipment, which prompted President Reagan in his Oct. 27 televised address to the nation to say "It looks like we got there just in time."

White House sources report that the President's remark reflected an assessment that the Soviets and Cubans were on the verge of completing a full-scale military base at the time of the invasion. As we go to press, these sources say that further revelations will be forthcoming.

The U.S. action ordered by the Commander in Chief represented the first serious exercise of aggressive U.S. force in the post-Vietnam period. It shattered in one day a web of

controls which had virtually paralyzed the presidency in the exercise of foreign policy since the process of Kissinger-organized global U.S. retreat began in the early 1970s. The mission completely ignored the "best advice" of Washington's political pundits, who had warned for 10 years that any President who sends U.S. troops to war is finished politically.

The counsel of the triumvirate of White House Chief of Staff James Baker III, his assistant Richard Darman, and White House Communications Director David Gergen, which had threatened to entangle the Reagan re-election drive in a morass of appeasement, was thus thrown aside. The action also sliced through the crippling War Powers Act and the post-Vietnam doctrines of the Harriman-McNamara Democrats and the Kissinger Republicans. And while the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and a host of other Eastern Establishment outlets slowly began their morning-after assaults on the President and his decisions, Reagan masterfully took to the national airwaves on Oct. 27 to seize the high ground and make clear what amounts to a new doctrine.

Setting forth the pattern

In a background briefing just prior to the President's address, a senior White House official emphasized that the shooting down of KAL 007 on Sept. 1 by the Soviet Union, the attempted assassination of President Chun of South Korea in Rangoon, the overthrow of Bishop, and the Oct. 23 massacre of U.S. Marines and French troops in Beirut were all part of one package crafted by the Soviet Union and Soviet surrogates. The official went on to forecast that it is "probable we will see more lower-order probes—insurgencies, terrorism, liberation struggles—in areas ever more vital to U.S. interests" by the U.S.S.R. in the immediate future. The source reported that U.S. policy would be to "deter and cope with" these Soviet moves.

In his speech, Reagan explained both the U.S. action in Grenada and his intention to keep U.S. forces in Beirut following the terrorist kamikaze assault on Marine headquarters which killed 225, by emphasizing a crucial feature of his new doctrine. "Some two months ago, we were shocked by the brutal massacre of 269 men, women, and children, more than 60 of them Americans, in the shooting down of a Korean airliner. Now, in these past several days, violence has erupted again, in Lebanon and Grenada." Then at the end of his speech, the President re-emphasized: "The events in Lebanon and Grenada, though oceans apart, are closely related. Not only has Moscow assisted and encouraged the violence in both countries, but it provides direct support through a network of surrogates and terrorists."

The second element of Reagan's new doctrine is that, following the military action in Grenada, the United States will continue to forcefully counter Soviet provocations. In the President's words: "We are a nation with global responsibilities. We are not somewhere else in the world protecting someone else's interests. We are protecting our own. . . .

There was a time when our national security was based on a standing army here within our own borders and shore batteries of artillery along our coasts. And, of course, a Navy to keep the sea lanes open for the shipping of things necessary to our well being.

"The world has changed. Today, our national security can be threatened in far away places. It is up to all of us to be aware of the strategic importance of such places and to be able to identify them. In these last few days I have been more sure than I've ever been that we Americans of today will keep freedom and maintain peace. I've been made to feel that by the magnificent spirit of our young men and women in uniform. . . ."

On Oct. 25, a day after the Beirut massacre, President Reagan previewed one element of his new doctrine. Addressing a group of out-of-town reporters, he stated that U.S. Marines were in Beirut to protect the "vital interests" of the United States and that they were on the battleline with an unnamed "force" that had previously taken Yemen and Ethiopia. The President was clearly referring to the Soviet Union. Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger had told nationwide television audiences on Oct. 23 that the Soviets were joined in the action by Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran. On Oct. 24, Secretary of State George Shultz informed the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Soviet Union, Iran, and Syria were all responsible for the attack.

In his Oct. 27 address, the President announced that the United States will not retreat in the face of this Soviet-backed operation as many in Congress are promoting, stating, "We have strong circumstantial evidence that the attack on the Marines was directed by terrorists who used the same methods to destroy the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. Those who directed this atrocity must be dealt justice. They will be."

White House sources believe the terrorist group to be the Iranian-backed Amal Shi'ite group. Intelligence networks have been humming with rumors of future U.S. actions that might involve Iran. Some believe those actions could include a re-assessment of U.S. arms policy to Iraq, a country against which the United States was only recently lobbying in a desperate attempt to stall French shipment of Super-Etendard jets and Exocet missiles to Baghdad in order to pay Teheran's ransom for keeping the Persian Gulf open.

On Oct. 25, following the U.S. invasion of Grenada, Shultz identified the second cornerstone of Reagan's new doctrine, saying, "Those who want to receive the message [from the invasion] will have to receive it."

What Reagan made clear well before the combined weight of Harriman Democrats, Kissinger Republicans, his political advisers, and the media could muster a campaign to put the genie of U.S. force back in the bottle is a commitment to use it again if need be. That is all the more vital because intelligence sources confirm the warnings from a senior White House adviser that the kinds of Soviet actions which provoked the Grenada invasion will continue to escalate.