

Comment

Blessed are those who try to make peace. It is also very hard work. Since Israel invaded Lebanon on 6 June we have seen just what patience and tenacity it required for President Reagan's special envoy to negotiate the withdrawal of Palestinian guerillas from Beirut without its coming to the final holocaust in the streets that seemed inevitable.

Of course nobody could regard American diplomatic intervention in the Middle East as either disinterested or innocent. It is incomprehensible that it took the eleven hours of Israeli bombardment of Beirut on 12 August before President Reagan at last roused himself to convince Mr Begin that the American tax-payers who provided the weapons had had enough. But, in the person of Philip Habib, a credible peacemaker had been found. Born in Brooklyn in 1920, the son of a Catholic grocer who had emigrated from Lebanon early in the century, Habib learned English at school but spoke Arabic at home. He also spoke some Yiddish with Jewish playmates in the neighbourhood. His career in the diplomatic service culminated in his taking an important part in negotiating the American withdrawal from Vietnam. In 1978, after four heart attacks and major surgery, he chose early retirement. President Carter got him out of retirement to help with the Camp David Agreements. Once again, this year, he has been summoned out of retirement and provided with a whole dispensary of drugs by his doctors, in order to make peace. Shuttling tirelessly between all the interested parties he arranged one cease-fire after another during those dreadful two months in Beirut. In the end he prevented the apparently inevitable massacre. Philip Habib's peace-making will surely be remembered.

Menachem Begin's war-making, however, is likely to be remembered much longer. He is an older and a much sicker man than Habib. In Israel some say that heavy medication has affected his judgment. But Begin has been involved in terrorism for many years. He belonged to *Irgun Zvai Leumi*, the guerilla organization founded in 1931 to protect what was then the Jewish minority in Palestine against Arab harassment. It became one of the most effective

agents in breaking the will of the Labour government after the war to retain British responsibility for avoiding chaos in Palestine. Its most famous exploit was the blowing up of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, in July 1946, with the British government and military offices it housed. Nearly a hundred people were killed, British, Jews and Arabs. But for Arabs the name of Menachem Begin will be associated for ever with the massacre at Deir Yassin. In April 1948, a special commando of *Irgun*, of which Begin was then leader, killed some two hundred and fifty people, mostly old men, women and children, in that Arab village near Jerusalem (now of course obliterated from the map). This atrocity was perpetrated in accordance with a deliberate policy of massive "retaliation" for Arab murders of Jews. It was a classical case of terrorism. Operation "Peace in Galilee", allegedly initiated to stop occasional Palestinian bombardment of Jewish settlements from over the Lebanese border, bore all the same marks of an act of revenge out of all proportion to the offence. The Israeli bombardment of Beirut in retaliation for infringements of the cease-fire agreements similarly inflicted punishment far beyond anything that was deserved – even if it had been Palestinian guerillas and not Lebanese civilians who suffered.

In 1948 the leading Jewish authorities of the day expressed outrage and shame at the massacre in Deir Yassin. In 1977 the former terrorist leader became prime minister of Israel. In 1982 his rhetoric about Palestinian terrorists sounds pretty hollow.

One result of Begin's invasion of Lebanon, however, has been an apparently significant shift in American policy. Actually, some political commentators are suggesting that Begin sent his troops north in order to *forestall* some such change of policy of which (on this view) he had got wind. However that may be, it now looks as if the mainstay of Israel has at last come round to recognizing officially the legitimate rights of the Palestinians.

Peace in the Holy Land remains a distant prospect. Public opinion in Israel will have to change more decisively yet. Begin's government will have to be voted out of office. The opposition, when returned to power, will have to follow up the American initiative which they have already welcomed (with understandable caution). Above all, of course, the Palestinian exiles who have been so decisively defeated by vastly superior force, will have to take part, by proxy if necessary, in consolidating the political process. Making peace *is* much harder work than making war – but, this once at least, a brutal and unnecessary war has unexpectedly opened the way to a real hope of peace.