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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

4 November 1983

N. S. P. R.

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Dear John,

Lebanon

The Prime Minister asked that thought be given to what our reaction should be if the US took retaliatory action following the bombing of their marine headquarters on 23 October. A team of officials, including Mr Egerton, the Assistant Under Secretary responsible for the Middle East and Mr Goulden, the Head of News Department, are standing by over the weekend, to react quickly should the Americans decide to retaliate. They would make early recommendations on our public line in the light of the precise circumstances as they emerged.

The latest Current Intelligence Group assessment concludes that the US Government are committed to some form of response, but that they have no easy options. There are a number of factors which may restrain the Americans, including the relative success so far of the reconciliation talks in Geneva, and the possibility that President Gemayel may very shortly visit Washington. We have ourselves made repeated representations to the Americans, culminating in the Prime Minister's message despatched today to President Reagan.

If the Americans nevertheless decide that they have to retaliate for the losses they suffered on 23 October, our response would clearly need to be carefully judged in the light of the precise nature and results of the US action. At one extreme the Americans might undertake a "surgical" strike, with minimal civilian casualties, against a pro-Iran Islamic faction which could convincingly be shown to be terrorist and to be responsible for the bomb attack against the US marines. In that case it would be very badly received

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in Washington (and perhaps also in Paris) if we were to distance ourselves from what the Americans would regard as an effective blow against international terrorism. At the other end of the scale would be a naval barrage involving considerable civilian casualties, or an air strike against Syrian forces in Lebanon or in Syria itself. This would call for a much stronger reaction from us. It is difficult to make plans in advance for the entire range of possible US reactions. But in the worst case our reaction would have to include the withdrawal of our MNF contingent.

The question of whether we had been consulted in advance would certainly arise after any US retaliatory strike. We would need to make clear that we had not been consulted by the Americans in advance, and that we had taken the initiative in raising the question with them through various channels to let them know that, with all our sympathy for US feelings of outrage at the Beirut bomb attack, we hoped that they would not allow themselves to be drawn into a cycle of violence.

Sir Geoffrey Howe has not yet seen this letter: I am submitting a copy to him in parallel.

I am copying this letter to Richard Mottram (MOD) and to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever,

Peter Ricketts

(P F Ricketts)
Private Secretary

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4 NOV 1983

