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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

14 November 1983

T194/83

LEBANON

The Prime Minister held a meeting at No. 10 Downing Street this morning at 1115 hours to consider President Reagan's message, the text of which was enclosed with my letter earlier today to Peter Ricketts. The meeting was attended by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Lord President, and the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Luce).

The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that, on the basis of the President's message, the Americans would clearly be able to say at a later stage that they had consulted us about the prospect of US military action in the Lebanon. We did not know whether the Americans had consulted the French and the Italians and, given the nature of the message, we could not ask them whether they had been consulted. A number of anxieties arose. If the United States did carry out military action, the risk to the British contingent in the Multi-National Force would be increased. In a situation where counter terrorism followed terrorism each step promoted the likelihood of a further one. In all our discussions with the United States about this matter we had talked of the desirability of confining any action to legitimate self defence. The US spoke of carrying out a surgical operation but one could not depend on any action being sufficiently surgical. The US Administration

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might misjudge the situation and attempt something too drastic. It was impossible for us to tell whether they would deal with the right people at the right time.

The Prime Minister agreed that it was desirable that any US action should be clearly in the nature of self defence. We should point out in reply to the President's message that the Americans were dealing with fanatical people to whom death was no deterrent. They would have to judge the likelihood of provoking further terrorist attacks by any step which they took. There would be an increased risk of loss of life and all MNF contingents would be in heightened danger. But we should also make it clear that the decision was for President Reagan. He alone could determine the risk to the troops involved in carrying out the action as well as the risk to others. She wondered whether the President was aware that the range of possible targets had been fully canvassed in the media in recent days and that there was unlikely to be any element of surprise. It would be a tragedy for the United States if things went badly wrong.

Mr. Luce pointed out that any action which set back the prospects for reconciliation and gave Syria the opportunity to reject that process would be regrettable.

The Lord President said that it would be extremely worrying if it emerged later that any US action had been taken in consultation with the Israelis. The Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary said that the US had specifically assured us that they were not envisaging an American/Israeli action.

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The Prime Minister recalled that she had told Mr. Dam of the US State Department last week that any step taken by the Americans should not give Iran an excuse for escalating the situation in the Gulf. She noted that the President, in his message, appeared to rule out direct action against Iran or Syria.

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Following further discussion, the meeting considered the outlines of a possible reply to President Reagan.

After the meeting, a draft reply was considered separately by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Lord President. After amendment, the Prime Minister considered it further, and the final message was despatched at 1415 hours on the hot line. A copy of that message is enclosed with this letter.

I am sending a copy of this letter, together with its enclosure, to Richard Mottram (Ministry of Defence), Janet Lewis-Jones (Lord President's Office) and Hayden Warren-Gash (Minister of State's Office).

A. J. COLES,

Brian Fall, Esq.,
Foreign and Commonwealth Office