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MOROCCO A FRIEND IN NEED

Beset by Polisario guerrillas and a faltering economy, King Hassan wants more U.S. aid, and offers strategic control of the Straits of Gibraltar

ON THE EVE OF a trip to the United States some months ago, during which he would meet President Ronald Reagan for the first time, fifty-three-year-old King Hassan the Second of Morocco invited me to interview him at his sprawling, green-domed palace in Fez, an ancient town that hugs lush green hills and houses one of the oldest Islamic universities in the world. Hassan, a small, dapper man who spoke in a mixture of exquisite French and cadence-filled Arabic, seemed enthusiastic about the forthcoming visit to Washington, and he talked at some length about his North African country's desire to develop a strong, friendly relationship with the United States. But the King spoke at greater length about the threat Morocco faced from a guerrilla group that calls itself the Polisario and wants to set up an independent Saharawi Democratic Arab Republic in the Western Sahara, a phosphate-rich former Spanish possession that Moroccan forces annexed in stages, beginning in 1976. Hassan believes that military and political support from the Reagan administration is crucial if Morocco is to thwart the Polisario, which is financed mostly by Algeria, Libya, and the Soviet Union. The King recalled that various African leaders and some senior U.S. officials close to former President Jimmy Carter—he did not identify them—had pressured him to negotiate directly with the guerrillas.

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SOME SENIOR WESTERN and American diplomats are, like Hassan, very hopeful about Morocco's future. Among them is the man sophisticated Moroccans wryly call "Mister America"—Joseph Verner Reed, Jr., the United States ambassador to Morocco. Reed's exuberant style has been seen as a reflection of the Reagan administration's enthusiasm for Hassan. Reagan appointed Reed, a tall, lanky patrician from Connecticut, on the recommendation of David Rockefeller, whose aide Reed was at Chase Manhattan Bank when Rockefeller served as chairman. "I am unabashedly a Fourth-of-July Republican," Reed told me over lunch one afternoon at his Rabat residence, a memento-filled, carpet-strewn mansion called the "Villa America." "For me this ambassadorship is being part of 'Forward America'—and I am not at all ashamed or embarrassed to speak up for America. I am also a passionate anti-Communist American. I feel we must support our true friends, like Morocco, with all we've got. I keep saying to the Moroccans: 'Count on us. We are with you.' I believe we must keep our word. I really do believe that the Soviet Union is the only remaining nineteenth-century empire, and to me it is obvious that the next pressure point for the Soviets is going to be the Kingdom of Morocco, situated strategically as it is on the Straits of Gibraltar."

Ambassador Reed is an open admirer of King Hassan, whom he characterizes as an "extraordinarily experienced and enlightened ruler." Reed has easy access to Hassan, a man other Western envoys find difficult to see. (Hassan's tardiness is legendary. When Queen Elizabeth II visited Morocco not long ago, the King kept her waiting for fifteen minutes in her car. Subsequently, Hassan found himself the only ruling monarch who was not invited to the wedding of Prince Charles.)

Reed's fondness for Hassan recalls a similar affection he harbored for the late Shah Mohammed Riza Pahlevi, of Iran, whose portrait decorates the walls of the sumptuous Reed residence in Rabat. The Ambassador asserts that, no matter what Hassan's current problems, the King will not be overthrown by Islamic zealots, as the Shah was. Reed says that

Hassan, unlike the Shah, is in touch with his own people. He also suggests that in the event of an imminent danger to Hassan, the United States will act more forthrightly to support the monarch than it did when the Shah was being threatened. "I came to Morocco with a plan—I was determined that the American presence be seen and felt here," he told me. In one of his most publicized actions, Reed ordered that the rather small American flag at the United States Embassy be replaced by a larger one (the new banner is bigger than the Moroccan flag that flies over Hassan's residence in Rabat).

Under Reed's supervision, the Central Intelligence Agency has vastly expanded its staff and activities. Reed recently became the first American ambassador to travel to the Western Sahara—a signal to Hassan and to neighboring Algeria and Libya that the United States backed Morocco's claims to that territory. Reed has also several times publicly characterized the Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, as a "pirate." A senior member of the Moroccan foreign service told me: "Reed is our dream ambassador. . . . we would never have been able to create a more perfect American ambassador to come to Morocco. The fact that he has such good access to both Hassan and Reagan is a very good thing indeed." Reed's colleagues in the diplomatic corps seem less impressed by him. A European ambassador whose country has close ties with the United States said to me: "What is Mr. Reed running for? This man's energy is amazing, but the general feeling is that he's overdoing it somewhat." Some influential Moroccans, such as Mohammed Benaissa, the well-known film-maker and member of parliament, feel that, despite Reed's many public promises of American aid to Morocco, the Reagan administration, already strapped for foreign-aid funds, may not be able to match his rhetoric with actual assistance. "A great deal of political hype is being floated, and I'm afraid that great expectations are being generated among us Moroccans," Benaissa said.

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