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ABROAD AT HOME | Anthony Lewis

Out to Lunch

BOSTON
President Reagan's attempt to blame anyone and everyone but himself for the security failure at the American Embassy in Beirut has discomfited even some of his admirers. But they have not allowed themselves to see the real point of the contemptible episode. That is that Ronald Reagan feels no responsibility — not for the Embassy and not for anything done by the United States Government.

Just try to puzzle out his suggestion last week that weakening of U.S. intelligence before he took office led to the terrorist success in Beirut. The relevant part of his answer to a college student's question about the bombing was:

"Where we're feeling the effects today of the near destruction of our intelligence capability in recent years — before we came here — the effort that somehow to say, well, spying is somehow dishonest and let's get rid of our intelligence agents, and we did that to a large extent."

The first thing to be said about that comment is that it was factually untrue. Past and present C.I.A. officials rushed to deny that the agency had been brought "near destruction" by Mr. Reagan's predecessor.

When former President Carter took offense at what he called Mr. Reagan's "false" and "insulting" claim, Mr. Reagan telephoned to explain that he had not meant to criticize Mr. Carter. He said he really meant to blame the Senate committee under the late Frank Church. But the Church committee investigated C.I.A. excesses such as plots to assassinate foreign leaders; it did not aim to cut intelligence-gathering activities.

The second thing to be said is that the President's comment was irrelevant. For the immediate failure in Beirut was a physical one: The failure to install gates and other security devices that the experts had said were needed. William Colby, former Director of Central Intelligence, put it: "The problem was not a failure of intelligence but a problem of putting in proper security."

The President's comment was, then, a mélange of untruths and irrelevancies. But I am convinced that Mr. Reagan fully believed what he said. That is why the episode is so revealing.

The point is that Mr. Reagan sees the world through a screen of ideology. The beliefs that make it up are fixed; no reality can dislodge them. Thus he believes that the United States "unilaterally disarmed" in the years before he took office, and no facts about the upgrading of our nu-

clear arsenal can change his mind.

One of the items in the Reagan ideological canon is that critics destroyed U.S. intelligence capabilities in the 1970's. And that was what came to mind when the President felt himself challenged on the Beirut failure. It was an ideological reflex.

The grip of ideology on his mind gives Ronald Reagan an extraordinary political advantage. He can blame whatever goes wrong on things beyond his control, and he can do so with perfect sincerity. Failure abroad must be a product of past weakness, of insufficient anti-Communist zeal. Trouble at home must be the result of Big Government, and we all know he is against that. He is never an incumbent.

In short, ideology enables Mr. Reagan to escape responsibility. And it is all genuine, in the skin-deep sense. He is not a person who is aware of a mistake and skillfully covers it up. He does not feel any responsibility, and hence he feels no guilt at failure.

George Will, the conservative commentator, wrote a thoughtful column criticizing the vapid excuses offered by the President and others for the Beirut bombing. But his conclusion missed the point. Mr. Reagan, he said, needed to make subordinates fear penalty when there was failure. But a President who feels no responsibility himself — who sees failure in ideological terms — cannot provide such leadership.

The most amazing thing about Ronald Reagan as a politician is his success in convincing the electorate that he is a "strong leader." His postures may look strong, to others as to him. But in the concrete terms that really measure political leadership, he is just not there. He is the most passive, the remotest President since Calvin Coolidge.

Alexander Haig called this White House "a ghost ship." We have a Government in which the President does not decide the most urgent issues of policy: arms control, the priorities of negotiation with the Soviet Union, Middle East policy. We have an unaccountable President. That is the larger, and the chilling, reality behind Mr. Reagan's conduct in the Beirut episode. □