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What Foreign Policy?

From Libya to Daniloff, Reagan's Ad-Hoc Approach Is Hokum

By David Ignatius

THE REAGAN administration hasn't ruled out a trade to free Nicholas Daniloff. Officials hope the Daniloff case won't disrupt arms-control talks or the summit. Oops. Wait a minute. Scratch that. The Daniloff case is an affront to human decency. There can be no talk of a trade for Daniloff. Er, sorry. Did we say no trade? Perhaps an "interim" trade is acceptable.

Libya's Moammar Gadhafi is planning new terrorist attacks against the United States, and the Reagan administration is readying plans for a military retaliation. Whoaa! Hold on. Correction. The administration isn't planning military action. Intelligence reports about Libya are inconclusive.

President Reagan is finally prepared for a "grand compromise" on arms control. He will accept limits on strategic defense in exchange for deep cuts in Soviet offensive missiles. Wait. Sorry. No, he isn't. A trade-off of Star Wars is out of the question. The president remains fully committed to SDI.

These are the sounds of an administration spinning its wheels on foreign policy. Indeed, after reviewing the past month's record of statements and retractions on key issues, a reasonable person might ask whether the administration is conducting a foreign policy at all these days. The answer is yes, but it's a strange sort of policy.

The Reagan administration's foreign policy might best be described as "ad-hocism." Far from being the rigid application of ideology that liberal critics feared, the Reagan foreign policy has proved to be something quite different: an ad-hoc process of trial and error, of alternating hard-line and soft-line statements, of proposals that are run up the flagpole to see who salutes.

It is foreign policy by public-opinion poll, and in many ways, it works. The country is happy. Usually it gets what it wants.

Reagan's ad-hocism has its virtues. When Ferdinand Marcos became an embarrassment to the United States this year, Reagan pulled the plug on his old friend. When public support eroded for American involvement in Lebanon in 1984, Reagan bailed out. It's hard to imagine this president getting involved in a messy, unpopular war like Vietnam. He wouldn't have the patience for it. And Reagan has accomplished the sleight of hand that matters most in foreign affairs: the appearance of strength.

The problem is that the undisciplined, ad-hoc style of the Reagan administration makes it hard to achieve any foreign-policy breakthroughs. It's surprising, in fact, how little this strong and popular president has been able to accomplish in nearly six years. The record of the weak and unpopular Carter administration, by comparison, is full of accomplishments, whether you agree with them or not: the Panama Canal treaty, normalization of diplomatic relations with China, a new SALT treaty with the Soviet Union, a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. The Reagan administration, in contrast, has had trouble brokering a relatively simple dispute between Egypt and Israel about some beach property in the Sinai desert.

The root of these difficulties is the breakdown of the National Security Council system. The NSC is supposed to bring order to the policy process and ensure that the administration speaks with one voice. But in this administration, the NSC machine hasn't worked to resolve interagency bickering and provide clear and timely presidential decisions.

A case in point is the Reagan administration's performance during the 1983 shootdown of Korean Air Lines Flight 007. As Seymour Hersh reconstructs the story in his new book, "The Target Is Destroyed," the administration had difficulty speaking with one voice in the first hours and days after the incident.

Reagan's first reaction to the Soviet attack was low-key. Hersh writes: "Reagan felt no immediate need to denounce the Soviets or in some other way to seek vengeance . . . . He didn't have to prove that he could stand up to the Soviets."

This initial low-key response soon gave way to a cacophony of aides and bureaucrats expressing indignation and urging reprisals. The president eventually decided to turn up the rhetoric. He denounced the Soviets for deliberately shooting down the plane (even though U.S. intelligence reports questioned whether the Soviets had realized it was a civilian airliner) and said that the Soviet action was worse than their 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. But Reagan didn't retaliate. This combination of red-hot rhetoric and no military risk seemed to suit the public mood.

A similar pattern of changing statements and ad-hoc policy has been evident in the foreign-policy crises of the past month. Consider:

■ *The Daniloff case.* Two days after the KGB seized the American journalist in Moscow, White House officials said the Reagan administration hadn't ruled out the possibility of an exchange to win Daniloff's freedom. The officials added that the administration hoped to avoid an international incident and disruption of arms-control talks, which were approaching a sensitive phase, or the prospective summit between Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

Four days later, amid growing public indignation about Daniloff, the line seemed to change. Secretary of State George Shultz said in a speech at Harvard: "Let there be no talk of a trade for Daniloff . . . . The Soviet leadership must find the wisdom to settle the case quickly in accordance with the dictates of simple human decency and of civilized national behavior." Then, last Friday, the hard line seemed to soften as American officials negotiated the "interim" release of Daniloff and an accused Soviet spy to the custody of their respective ambassadors.

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• *Arms Control.* Reagan sent a letter in July to Gorbachev that many administration officials described as a breakthrough on arms control. They told reporters that Reagan was finally prepared to accept limitations on testing and deployment of defensive weapons as part of a new arms control agreement.

Not so, claimed Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger last week. He asserted during a lunch meeting with journalists that Reagan hadn't agreed to any such "grand compromise." He maintained: "The grand compromise was more in the minds of certain beholders than anything else. It was never something the president considered because he was never willing to give up strategic defense."

Who's right? Those like Weinberger who insist that the president will never give up SDI? Or the senior administration officials who maintain that the president deeply wants an arms-control agreement with Moscow? Both are probably right. Our ad-hoc president wants both things, and apparently feels he doesn't have to choose between them.

■ *Libya.* The Wall Street Journal created an uproar last month when it reported: "After a lull, Col. Gadhafi has begun plotting new terrorist attacks . . . . And the Reagan administration is preparing to teach the mercurial Libyan leader another lesson. Right now, the Pentagon is completing plans for a new and larger bombing of Libya in case the president orders it."

Oh yeah? Administration officials in Washington told The New York Times that "the United States had no hard evidence that Libya was planning new terrorist attacks and they flatly denied reports of impending military action against Libya." Oh yeah? A senior White House official in Santa Barbara told reporters the Journal story was "highly authoritative." Oh yeah? Other officials said the administration had in fact been caught in a particularly inept psychological warfare scheme, one that seemed to frighten the American public more than it did Gadhafi.

The Reagan administration's foreign-policy problems stem from the inability of the Reagan NSC to speak clearly and coherently during crises. Ultimately this incoherence reflects Reagan's own failure to control the policy process or to find a national security adviser who can do the dirty work for him.

Seymour Hersh, certainly no fan of Henry Kissinger, argues that the former national security adviser could teach the Reaganites an important lesson. Says Hersh: "Kissinger understood that you have to grab control of communications in the White House and speak with one voice."

David Ignatius, an associate editor of The Washington Post, is the editor of the Outlook section.