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NEWS ANALYSIS

Beirut: Bombs, Bullets,  
Barbed Wire--and Baptists

By David King

(Editors note: David King, a Southern Baptist missionary in Lebanon since 1959, wrote this unsolicited letter to the Foreign Mission Board. It is offered as a first person news analysis of Lebanon today).

WEST BEIRUT, Lebanon (BP)--A few years ago I wrote an article entitled "Learning to Live With Guns." Now it is far more than guns. It is car bombs, mortar bombs and airplane bombs! It is artillery shells, long range rockets, rocket-propelled grenades, naval artillery, tank cannons, recoilless rifles and all manner of smaller guns.

Embassies and institutions of all the member countries of the multinational "peace-keeping" force are now barricaded by razor-sharp barbed wire atop earth mounds all around. Streets are sealed off. Traffic, already chaotic and jammed in Beirut, has gotten worse.

Is there any hope for a solution?

Most observers are pessimistic. The truth is, unless attitudes change, conflicts in the Middle East will continue to rage and to take their toll in lives lost and property destroyed, people maimed and bitterness engendered by increasing self-righteousness. People will continue to blame other parties for the mess and refuse to acknowledge any responsibility for what is happening. So far there is no indication of any willingness to repent or to forgive or to back down or even to compromise for the sake of the common good.

The answer is obvious to those who know the Lord Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and have experienced his transforming power. Only Christ can transform hate to love, jealousy to forgiveness, ashes to beauty, tears of sadness to tears of joy. Christ is the only hope. But because religion and politics are completely interwoven in the Lebanese system, the very mention of Christ has political overtones.

One little girl at our Baptist school asked the missionary principal's wife, Leola Ragland, "Are you a Christian?" Mrs. Ragland answered with tact and Holy Spirit wisdom, "I love Jesus." The little girl sighed with relief and said, "Oh good. I was afraid maybe you were one of those murdering Christians." How ironic! What a travesty on the name of Christ!

Eleven Baptist churches and assorted missions are trying to overcome such an image by: proclaiming the truths of God's word about man's sinfulness and God's love and the transforming power of the gospel; demonstrating that Christianity means love--not hate, brotherhood--not bombs, forgiveness--not revenge, helpfulness, kindness, gentleness and peace; and demonstrating Christ's love through distributing thousands of dollars in aid to stricken families.

Some families have lost their homes and everything they own. Often families have lost breadwinners, who have been killed or hospitalized.

Churches are reaching out in love to their members and others in need in their communities in the name of Jesus--the name which more than any other crosses barriers and touches people's hearts.

No, we haven't seen any widespread turning to Christ as yet, though we long for that to happen and do all we can to stimulate it. But here and there, in ones and twos, sometimes in threes and fours, people are coming to Christ, finding in him peace, comfort and courage in the midst of trial.

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Shells are exploding as I write this. One just whooshed over the house and crashed in flames below us on the hillside. But the Lord Jesus is here and he is our peace.

We are thankful to God that Baptist churches are ministers of reconciliation in the midst of bombs, bullets and barbed wire!

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(David King has been a Southern Baptist missionary in Lebanon since 1959.)

All Former SBC Presidents  
Oppose U.S.-Vatican Move

By Stan Hasteley

Baptist Press  
1/26/84

WASHINGTON (BP)--Twelve former presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention have joined current SBC President James T. Draper Jr., and his three immediate predecessors in objecting to President Reagan's appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican.

Their action means every living former SBC president and the incumbent have protested Reagan's action, a total of 16 signers.

The original letter of protest was sent to the White House Jan. 6, and was signed by Draper, and immediate past presidents Bailey E. Smith, 1981-82, Adrian P. Rogers, 1980, and Jimmy R. Allen, 1978-79.

The four signers told President Reagan his appointment of an ambassador to the Holy See "would be a clear violation of the principle of church-state separation, a dangerous precedent in church-state relations and an occasion for practical problems in the missionary work of all denominations."

On Jan. 10, the Vatican announced establishment of full diplomatic relations with the U.S., an announcement confirmed several hours later by the State Department and White House.

When asked to add their names to the letter of protest, the 12 former presidents agreed, some adding pungent comments of their own.

Herschel H. Hobbs, 1962-63, declared: "It is definitely a violation of the First Amendment. No matter how you slice it, the Vatican is still a church...if they send an ambassador to the Vatican, they ought to send one to Nashville. This claim that the Vatican is a state...I used to plough a farm about as big as that state."

K. Owen White, 1964, said he is "deeply concerned" about Reagan's action. "I see this as a flagrant and inexcusable violation of the principle of separation of church and state. I want to be counted among those who strongly protest this action."

Carl Bates, 1971-72, echoed concerns of numerous U.S.-based missionary-sending organizations, including the SBC Foreign Mission Board, when he said: "I consider this to be a serious blow to evangelical mission work throughout the world."

And Louie D. Newton, 1947-48, the oldest living former president, cited protests he sent President Franklin D. Roosevelt for seeking to upgrade Myron Taylor's status as personal representative to that of full ambassador and fellow Baptist Harry S Truman for naming Mark W. Clark ambassador. Both Roosevelt and Truman backed down after fierce public outcries.

Newton asked Reagan to "reconsider his appointment...in the hope and prayer that the cherished principle of separation of church and state may be preserved in our beloved nation."

Also signing the letter were James L. Sullivan, 1977; Jaroy Weber, 1975-76; Owen Cooper, 1973-74; W.A. Criswell, 1969-70; H. Franklin Paschall, 1967-68; W. Wayne Dehoney, 1966-67; Ramsey Pollard, 1960-61 and J.D. Grey, 1952-53.

In Washington, meanwhile, Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James M. Dunn disputed a White House claim that Reagan has received virtually no protest calls or mail. "It's simply not true," Dunn said.

Senate Panel Okays Vatican  
Funding; House Hearing Set

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (BP)--A Senate appropriations panel has informally approved a State Department request to reprogram funds to pay for a full diplomatic mission to the Vatican, but its House of Representatives counterpart has held up action pending an early February hearing.

Sen. Paul Laxalt, R-Nev., chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State and Judiciary, has given the State Department his approval of a request to reprogram fiscal 1984 funds for the Vatican mission, according to a subcommittee spokesman.

Laxalt's approval, the spokesman said, noted the objection of Sen. Ernest F. Hollings, D-S.C., ranking minority member of the panel and an outspoken opponent of the Reagan administration's decision to end a 116-year-old U.S. policy against full diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

Reprogramming requests from federal agencies--such as the one from the State Department for Vatican mission funding--no longer require formal approval of the congressional appropriations committees with jurisdiction over their funding. However, House and Senate subcommittee spokesmen agree the State Department is unlikely to go against the informal disapproval of appropriations panels on either side of Capitol Hill.

Although other members of the Senate subcommittee may join Hollings in opposing the move, a panel spokesman said Laxalt, considered President Reagan's closest friend in the Senate, is not likely to back away from his support of the White House on the controversial issue.

The House Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, State, the Judiciary and Related Agencies, chaired by Rep. Neal Smith, D-Iowa, has scheduled a Feb. 6 hearing to consider the reprogramming request. The State Department has asked for a shift in its fiscal 1984 budget to provide \$833,000 and a staff of nine for the Vatican embassy. The current State Department budget includes \$481,000 for the four-person staff of presidential representative William A. Wilson to the Vatican.

A House subcommittee spokesman said the hearing was scheduled to hear only from State Department witnesses on the reprogramming request but did not rule out the panel looking at the underlying controversy surrounding the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican.

The hearing will be the first Vatican embassy-related forum in the 98th Congress, despite action last year repealing the long-standing ban on funding of a diplomatic mission to the Holy See. Early this year, the White House established full diplomatic ties with the Vatican and named Wilson, who faces confirmation hearings in the Senate, as ambassador.

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Reagan Renews Appeal  
For His Social Agenda

By Stan Haste

Baptist Press  
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WASHINGTON (BP)--Declaring that the American people hunger for "spiritual revival," President Reagan told Congress and the nation Jan. 25 that school prayer, tuition tax credits and a ban on abortions remain top priorities for his three-year-old administration.

In his third State of the Union message since taking office as 40th president, Reagan received thunderous applause when he challenged assembled lawmakers to return oral prayer to public school classrooms.

Reminding Congress that it practices daily "a 200-year-old tradition meant to signify America is one nation under God," the president asked: "If you can begin your day with a member of the clergy standing right here leading you in prayer, then why can't freedom to acknowledge God be enjoyed again by children in every schoolroom across this land?"

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Reagan, whose 43-minute address included several assertions America is "good," added: "America was founded by people who believed that God was their rock of safety. He is ours." Taking a line from Abraham Lincoln, he said: "I recognize we must be cautious in claiming that God is on our side. But I think it's alright to keep asking if we are on His side."

On tuition tax credits for parents who send their children to nonpublic schools, Reagan pledged he will "continue to press" for legislation to "soften the double payment for those paying public school taxes and private school tuition."

In spite of the decisive defeat of his proposal last year in the GOP-controlled Senate, Reagan renewed his argument tuition tax credits would provide "greater competition among public and nonpublic schools." He added: "Without standards and competition there can be no champions, no records broken, no excellence in education or any other walk of life."

Unlike their enthusiastic response to his views on public school prayer, lawmakers sat quietly during the tuition tax credit remarks.

On another of his favorite social issues, Reagan also renewed his commitment to curb abortions. But he stopped short of advocating a constitutional amendment to ban the practice altogether, declaring: "We should rise above bitterness and reproach" in addressing the problem.

"... if Americans could come together in a spirit of understanding and helping," he said, "then we could find positive solutions to the tragedy of abortion."

Reagan received his longest and most bipartisan ovation of the night when he addressed a section of the speech to the people of the Soviet Union, some of whom undoubtedly heard it over the U.S.-funded Voice of America.

Acknowledging "our governments have had serious differences," he went on to declare: "But our sons and daughters have never fought each other in war. If we Americans have our way, they never will."

On nuclear weapons, Reagan said, "there is only one sane policy, for your country and mine, to preserve our civilization in this modern age: A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought."

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Texas Baptist CLC  
Raps Vatican Ties

Baptist Press  
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DALLAS (BP)--The Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission has urged citizens to repudiate the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the United States and the Vatican.

A resolution adopted by the 15-member elected commission denounced the action and expressed dismay at "the damage perpetrated by both the Congress and the president to the cause of religious liberty in America by this act."

The commission, which speaks to the 2.3-million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas on moral and social issues, affirmed "positive regard for Roman Catholics who are our neighbors," respect for the moral impact of the Roman Catholic Church and admiration for Pope John Paul II for his efforts for peace in the world.

"However," the commission said, "we repudiate the establishment of a political tie between our national government and the Vatican because we believe such establishment to be both unconstitutional and a serious threat to the religious liberty of Americans."

Appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican is "patently unconstitutional," said the commission, because it (1) benefits one faith to the exclusion of all others (2) has no overriding secular rather than religious purpose and (3) will necessarily entangle the government of the U.S. with one religious faith.

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South Carolina Group  
Picks Issues For 1984

By Larry Crisman

COLUMBIA, S.C. (BP)--Pari-mutuel betting, the blue laws and church-state separation issues will be primary concerns for the South Carolina Baptist Convention's Christian Life and Public Affairs Committee during 1984.

E.C. Watson, assistant for programs to the state convention's executive secretary-treasurer and Baptist Building staff liaison to the committee, said the group will "be making efforts to influence legislators concerning action on the three issues during 1984."

"The committee reaffirmed its opposition to efforts to legalize pari-mutuel gambling in South Carolina because we believe it would create more problems than the paltry amount of tax money which is anticipated could every correct," Watson said. "We call on all South Carolina Baptists to learn about the insidious nature of the gambling menace, and reaffirm their opposition, especially to their own representatives in the legislature."

Watson said the committee has asked him to survey members of the South Carolina House of Representatives concerning their positions on the pending pari-mutuel betting bill. Results of the survey will be relayed to Southern Baptists in South Carolina so they may contact their state representatives.

The survey results also will be passed on to the Christian Action Council, a Columbia-based ecumenical group, so other denominations in the state can use the data.

"With respect to the blue laws," Watson said, "a study is to be made which will serve as the basis of the preparation of scripturally sound guidance related to the proper use of Sundays by Christians. The study information also will help Christians form their own positions on the blue laws."

On church-state separation issues during the new year, Watson said the committee plans to "set forth time-honored positions of Baptists with rationale as it relates to current church-state issues."

The Christian Life and Public Affairs Committee speaks to and not for Southern Baptists in South Carolina on social and moral issues, Watson explained. It suggests positions for Baptists to take which are in keeping with the denomination's historical stances and also periodically calls on Baptists to exercise their influence with legislators regarding issues.

The committee also reelected Chairman Clyde Runion, pastor, Second Baptist Church, Lancaster, to another one-year term; voiced opposition to the appointment of an ambassador to the Vatican on the grounds "it is both unnecessary and a flagrant violation of the church-state separation principle;" deplored "efforts to create tuition tax credits at the federal government level which would favor private and church schools over public schools and violate the principal of church-state separation, and commended U.S. Sen. Ernest F. Hollings (D-S.C.) for his opposition to the tuition tax credit legislation.

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