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RECONDUCTION AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS

A Letter from Charles F. Gallagher

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Reconduction might be defined as a vital matter which is generating an unusual amount of energy in this small land mass of Lebanon. The energy, however, is not chemical, it is political. And reconduction has nothing to do with the natural sciences.

Reconduction is instead the term used in translation to describe the complex political campaign recently undertaken by a group of leading politicians and a part of the press here to secure the re-election of President Camille Chamoun to another six-year term of office beginning in September of this year. The campaign, heavily orchestrated by so-called "loyalist" groups with a sometimes baffling counterpoint that seems to be trying to mask the real goal, requires two steps: a reform of the constitution (ta'adil ad dastur), which now makes it illegal for the president to succeed himself, and the actual renewal of the presidency (tajdid ar ri'asah) in the fall election, in which the president is chosen by the same assembly which must first decide on constitutional reform.

The dispute over renewal of the presidential mandate broke into the open at the beginning of the year when President Chamoun was asked to announce publicly that he would not be a candidate for re-election. The petitioners were members of the opposition National Union Front (Jabhah al Ittihad al Watani) which had been constituted the year before in protest against Lebanon's acceptance of the

principles of the Eisenhower Doctrine. Since Lebanese acceptance meant in effect Chamoun's acceptance at that time, the opening salvo of the Front immediately put the presidential campaign, at least on the surface, at the level of international cold war tensions. But to assume a priori that all loyalists are now in favor of the Doctrine, or the West in general, and that the opposition is against them, is a great oversimplification.

The supporters of the president took up the gauntlet very quickly and this spring began a concerted campaign to rally both popular and parliamentary support to make possible the necessary constitutional changes. This campaign went into high gear early this month, timed to the emotional climaxes of the great religious holidays which happened this year to coincide in mid-April: the Roman Catholic Easter on the 6th, the Orthodox Easter the following week, and the end of the fast month of Ramadan on April 20th, followed by the traditional Bayram celebrations of the Muslim population. That feelings about reconduction should have solidified at this time is natural in a multiconfessional state such as Lebanon, but the depth and detail of the politico-religious passions at this particular time offer a key to some of the problems which now overhang this tiny country as the result of both its internal social structure and recent, growing pressure from the outside, on the one hand from its "Arab brothers," on the other from its "Western friends."

Often described as a "compact of minorities," Lebanon is a country which has institutionalized and legalized sectarian differences as an insurance against domination by any minority or group of minorities. It is also a country without a census; at least there has been no official count since 1932. In a population estimated in 1955 at around 1,400,000, the government considers that there are about 800,000 Christians (including 420,000 Maronites and 200,000 Greek Orthodox); 500,000 Muslims (split 275,000 Sunni Muslims and 225,000 Shi'a Muslims) and nearly 100,000 Druzes, with lesser minorities of

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Greek Catholics, Armenians and others, making up the Christian total. All these figures are not only hypothetical but quite suspect. If they favor the Christian component it must be remembered that the estimate was made by Christians who have a solid interest in retaining their advantage. Some unofficial guesses divide the country roughly 50-50, and the cynical assumption is often made that the balance must be nearly even between Christians and Muslims because neither side is pressing too overtly for an exact count.

These figures assume an importance in Lebanon which they have almost nowhere else in the world, because religious affiliation is a way of life. The various sectarian communities, born as refugee groups in more distant history and confirmed in their cellular existence by the Ottoman millet system, under which the personal affairs of each non-Muslim group were subject to its own religious jurisdiction, form closely-knit groups which struggle against each other for power and security. Power, in an economic sense (perhaps its most attractive side to a Lebanese), is partly the prize that goes to the most predatory in a very predatory society, and partly the spoils that accrue from previously acquired political power. And political power not only rests upon confessional ties and rejection of outgroups, but is actually formalized in Article 95 of the Constitution, which stipulates that the president shall be a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim, the Speaker of the Assembly a Shi'a Muslim, and so on. While the security of minority groups may not be so easily guaranteed by manmade constitutions, it must be admitted that the precarious check-and-balance make-up of Lebanese society has provided a fairly effective measure of liberty, especially in comparison to its neighbors (but not equality) and a good deal of the right to economic opportunity in a country which has a rising standard of living (per-capita income of over \$300 per year) already more than double that of any other Arab state.

Thus the battle over reconduction can possibly be viewed in one light in these terms of power and security. Power for the individuals representing, or claiming to represent the various communities, power in a personal sense; and security for the minority community as a whole, with each one of the communities heir to a long tradition of suspicion, intransigence and chicanery, when the vital question of the preservation of its liberties is at stake. Within these two broad horizontal categories there can be found vertical levels of emphasis as well: the power struggle may be of local or clan origin, and personal enmities often play a decisive role; attachments with other parties and ideas in the rest of the Arab world intertwine, for Lebanon does not and cannot exist in isolation; and the desire to play an international role as a lever in Arabism's drift between East and West is also present in the shadows.

For Americans, who are now celebrating Law Day with the traditional affirmation that the United States is a country ruled

not by men but by laws, the Lebanese ethic of government may seem an almost total antithesis. For here is a country in which human and social personalities are the compelling force and the law exists as a backdrop for the piece that is being performed by a group of endlessly rotating actors, many of them very self-conscious prima donnas. There is no law that cannot be broken or, as in this case, changed for the convenience of a man or a group -- from the ability to buy citizenship to the threat of local bakers to call a strike if the sanitary laws dealing with breadmaking should be enforced. The classic example must be the activities of Beirut taxi drivers; there is hardly one who obeys a one-way street sign and the police seem only interested in getting them through before an accident occurs (few do). Tickets are handed out and fines assessed with abandon but they are left unpaid and, finally, the drivers' union visits the government to obtain a general amnesty for all violations. The government agrees because the taxi drivers carry much weight as expeditors of transportation to the polls in nearby mountain towns at election time. The drivers threaten to boycott pro-Government villages, where voting by village is common, and the authorities cannot offend them.

Again the principle is illustrated by the behavior of the Lebanese Assembly. As one paper headlined it the other day, "Yesterday, during a dull one-hour session the Chamber voted a series of laws in haste." The details of the session were even more illuminating. Meeting at 6:30 in the afternoon, the Chamber had to be suspended after its hour's work because a quorum was lacking; most of the members had slipped off to the country for the week end. And the Speaker rebuked the gathering in curt terms:

"The work of the Chamber leaves much to be desired. There are many bills waiting....Let us leave discussions of a political nature to a later date and put ourselves to work for now."

Political discussions, with sharp personal quarrels, had been the highlight of the sessions.

This predilection for the personal, as opposed to the abstract and the mechanical, which often appears to be a generalized Arab trait, certainly has something appealingly human in it. Lebanon, in spite of many opéra bouffe tendencies, does function after all, and in many respects it functions quite effectively; but it may be that the order within the disorder which is found under the surface is attainable only under specific conditions of scale and measured temperament which, if exceeded, lead to something approaching chaos.

It is this aspect of the reconduction problem -- the tendency to growing immoderation -- which has led many thoughtful Lebanese to voice their inquietude about the political polarization which has lately been so accentuated. No one, typically, is worried about the principle of changing the



LEBANON'S PRESIDENT
CAMILLE CHAMOUN
CAMPAIGNS FOR A
CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE
TO PERMIT HIM TO
SUCCEED HIMSELF

CHAMOUN SPEAKS in the house of Prime Minister Sami as Solh
after an enthusiastic welcome by his supporters during the
Bayram celebration of the Muslim community



constitution, for that had already been done once -- in the case of the previous president in 1947. But many are disturbed by the fear that, for the first time, personal rivalries and ambitions, heightened by the strain of international politics, may go beyond the elastic but nonetheless definite limits in which politics is played to the hilt, and upset the country's precarious stability.

An illustration of this attitude is found in a recent public statement attributed to one of the apolitical, aristocratic opponents of the President, Henri Pharaon. After paying lip service to the idea of constitutional integrity, Mr. Pharaon, a good friend of Bishara al Khuri (President of the Republic from 1943-52) and consequently opposed on personal grounds to the present incumbent, added:

"The personality of President Chamoun, far from making us accept the possibility of a revision of the constitution, leads us to a firmer attachment to the prescribed rule of nonrenewal."

And the final extent of the intermingling of Lebanese politics is underlined by noting that Mr. Pharaon is the honorary president of the taxi-drivers' union.

As each community took the occasion of its holiday this month to show its strength, there was considerable apprehension about just how explosive the Muslim celebration of Bayram might be. The Mufti of the Republic, the supreme Muslim religious authority, had organized an iftar, a banquet for the holiday, to which no government cabinet member or deputy was invited. The "counter-iftar" held under the auspices of the loyalist Muslim Prime Minister, Sami as Solh, at his home, was boycotted and an incidental bomb thrown; the engine was deposited at a reasonable distance and only one person was wounded. A minor fracas was caused by government supporters shooting off their revolvers in the air (the unarmed political adherent is a rarity these days) in front of the Great Mosque, but all in all exponents of sensationalism were disappointed. Compared to the Bayrams that old-timers remember with a sort of bloodthirsty fondness -- the intramuslim feuding of 1950 and the 1955 torchlight parade which turned accidentally into a holocaust when some of the oil-soaked torches were dropped, it was a calm celebration.

The day was chiefly marked by the appearance of the president at the counter-iftar and his measured but biting attack on opponents of his policy. The suave charm and oratorical brio which testify to his previous career as diplomat and lawyer were thickly laid on before an audience estimated at 10,000 by loyalist papers, 3,000 by the opposition. Much of his speech carefully followed the tenuous path between the Arab World ("Lebanon is an integral part of the Arab World, and every Arab cause, large or small, is its cause"), its hostile factions ("The principal question which exists in the Arab World today lies in the persistent conflicts opposing its several members; Lebanon will not agree to stay aloof from them. It will use all its efforts to

dissipate them in order to create a fruitful co-operation between brother Arab states"), and the West ("Our relation with the Western countries and our participation in the preservation of world peace depend on the sincerity of the Occident, its solidarity with us and the mutual and equal advantages which stem from such solidarity"). And he did not neglect what to many is the cornerstone of the issue, when he called for the continuance of a "total and definitive independence for Lebanon, fully desired by all its sons."

Although nothing specific was mentioned about renewal in the presidential speech, it was widely taken as a justificative résumé of his past policies which would precede asking for a new term. The opposition considered it a forthright challenge and there is no doubt that the counter-iftar contributed to the heavy atmosphere of the day. The deep cleavage between the communities was apparent everywhere. Uniformed gendarmerie and obvious plainclothesmen stood in crucial corners of Beirut and guarded government buildings. Cars coming into town over the mountain road from the Biqa' region, including the one I was traveling in, were stopped and searched. The police explained they were looking for drugs, for hashish is cultivated in the valley and transported to Beirut, but they certainly would not have been overly surprised to find arms.

Gun-running, almost entirely from Syria, has gotten to be a source of concern to the government. Cases of smuggling have multiplied in the past month and, although officials do spot and seize a goodly quantity of what comes in across the border, total control is almost impossible with a population which has long had a stock of arms of its own in addition to the tradition of using them in local feuds and community defense. The capture of four Syrian customs officers for inside the Lebanese frontiers made official Syrian connivance a certainty. Nightly explosions continue in Beirut, something which is almost habitual here now, but more serious sabotage and demonstrations have taken place in the Muslim coast towns of Tyre and Tripoli and in the northeastern fringe of the country. "Armed insurrection in the Shūf [a region of Mount Lebanon almost overlooking Beirut]," read one alarmed headline on the night I arrived here. It wasn't that at all, but arms were being distributed both to government supporters and to followers of Kamal Jumlat, a Druze activator of the opposition front. Both sides charge that their moves are made in self-defense and it is impossible to know who is truthful, but the net result of all this in recent weeks has been to give the impression that Lebanon is a camp armed against itself with the stockpile of both factions growing steadily.

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The National Union Front which spearheads the opposition to the President has been described by a witty Lebanese political observer as neither national, in that it threatens to

betray the interests of an independent Lebanon, nor a union, owing to the diversity of tendencies among its principal motivators, but certainly a front for objectives which members of the group are usually afraid to state openly.

It would be hard to imagine much unity among such figures as the Patriarch of the Maronites, who feels that he cannot forego his responsibility for Maronites in other Arab countries and must thus be very cautious in his political stands; Muslim politicians like Saib Salam of Beirut and Sabri Hamadeh, the zaim of the Biqa' Valley, both of whom must take into account the strong Nasserist sentiments of their Muslim backers; Hamid Franjiyeh, the Maronite leader of the north who is moved by personal feelings about the president, (but who, five or six years ago, when Chamoun was considered to be the most "Arab" of Lebanese politicians, was himself considered the outstanding exponent of an exactly reverse policy); and Kamal Jumblat, the Druze leader who, like all Druzes, is fortunate enough to have members of his family on both sides of the political fence. Perhaps the only unity of these men is a negative unity against something, which in Lebanon is more likely to mean against someone.

One is even tempted to doubt the complete cohesion of such men and their followers in trying to determine the relative power of the ward politics they practice, which would in theory split some of the communities down the middle, and the contrary affirmation that a straight confessional split will prevail. It should be noted that while a few quite prominent Maronites may be against Chamoun for personal grievances, the majority of the Maronite community seems solidly behind him as the ideal guardian of their security in what they feel to be an engulfing Muslim sea around them. And, let there be no mistake about it, whatever the population ratios Lebanon is in spirit and reality a Christian state in which all the key positions -- from that of a President with a strong executive power, through the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, the Chief of Security, and the Director-General of the Ministry of the Interior (all of whom come from one family), to the Chief of Staff of the Army and the Commandant of the Gendarmerie, are Maronite Christians. Politically and economically the Muslim Lebanese are relegated to the back seat and it may be this as much as the sense of brotherhood with nearby Muslim states that gives them their undoubted attachment to another, greater but vague homeland beyond the mountains.

Listen to a prominent Christian "loyalist" speak, as I did recently, and you will have the extreme of this attitude. According to him, "concessions to the Muslims are the same as appeasing Hitler in the 1930's", and throughout his conversation runs an even undercurrent of condescension for his fellow Muslim citizens. This second-rateness is reflected in many of the everyday aspects of life: the social events, receptions, dinners, the theater, the races, at all of which one sees Christians in numbers overwhelmingly superior to their numerical strength; in the unequal division of income and the poverty of Muslim villages

in the south and the frontier areas, the lack of good roads in their regions, and the operation of governmental machinery which works in one direction. If you are a Syrian or a Palestinian refugee who is Christian, it is possible to get citizenship here; if you are a Muslim you may try but you will finally find that the wheels do not turn; somehow, somewhere, papers bog down and nothing happens.

I asked my loyalist interlocutor if he thought the confessional split was irrevocable, and he answered yes. His attitude, a curious mixture of paternalism, defiance and ultimate pessimism, was typified by his statement that at worst Lebanon could slough off the mainly Muslim peripheral areas in the north, south and east, and live in reduced territory, as it had from 1861-1920, rather than as the present "Greater Lebanon."

This is an extreme view, however, and other responsible Maronites, conscious of the gaps between the minorities, suggest that the rising standard of living in Lebanon, if proper economic concessions are made to the Muslim population, can carry the whole country forward in spite of the powerful external emotional pressure now being exercised upon such a large fragment of the citizenry. There is much to debate in this statement, for not only has much recent Arab history shown the fallacy of overestimating the strength of economic rewards as against sentiment, but the whole main current of Islam has consistently followed the postulate that the sharing of political power between Muslims and non-Muslims on terms of equality and satisfaction is impossible. Several Maronites pointed out to me as proof of their contentions the example of Pakistan's drift since its creation, and the more recent subtle but effective easing out of minority groups from responsible positions in Egypt and now in Syria.

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The final and, some say, most important level on which the reconduction battle is being waged is that of Lebanese foreign policy; and, by implication, the entire future of Lebanon as an independent state in relation to the rest of the Arab Middle East. Just as the country is crystallizing its politics internally on a religious basis, it is also split in its view of the outer world between a segment, mostly Maronite, which has always looked westward and continues to do so, and another which places a higher value on the continuity of tight bonds with the Arab World. The strongest view here, again expressed by a Maronite intellectual, is that "the battle of East and West is being fought here in Lebanon after it was suspended at Suez." Perhaps there is something a bit self-inflated in that statement, and it is doubtful if the West is conscious of participation to this degree.

Yet, with what is an altogether common Arab tendency to make outsiders share at least some of their burdens, both

government and opposition sources have lately spread wide the snares to entrap foreign support and foist off partial responsibility for whatever may be going wrong. Witness the opposition charge the President Chamoun had summoned the Sixth Fleet to his support, with the added, thoroughly Lebanese detail that when a power shortage darkened Beirut for a few hours last week it was whispered that the electricity cutoff was to enable American marines to land unobserved on dark beaches near the capital. (This may sound fantastic and far-fetched to American ears but it is the kind of rumor that many, many people in this part of the world are eager to believe.)

Meanwhile the government has been maneuvering in international politics in a devious way. The loyalists, feeling themselves in an awkward posture because of Lebanon's hasty acceptance of last year's Eisenhower Doctrine -- which almost all Lebanese now consider an unprofitable and embarrassing entanglement -- have now begun to out-oppose the opposition by aiming a steady attack at the principle of accepting further American aid, suggesting instead that Arab sources, properly organized, can supply Lebanon's capital needs more honorably than can American financial support (some \$36,000,000 in the last five years). For this paltry sum, they say, Lebanon has compromised its position with fellow Arab countries.

A host of complicated explanations are offered when, as has just happened, the Speaker of the Assembly, Adel Osseyran, visits Cairo, and another prominent loyalist deputy, Emile Bustani, goes to Damascus. Both announce that Lebanon has decided to renounce further American economic assistance, which it has not in fact yet done. What is the reason for this? Is it a desire on the part of the president, who is commonly reported to have sent them, to turn against the Americans because they are a handicap to his bid for re-election? Is it that the Americans are not supporting him as he originally hoped? Is it simply beating the opposition by joining them? Or is it an attempt to win over some of the opposition leaders of the Front and break their union temporarily (at the possible cost of losing some of the extreme pro-Western support already behind Chamoun)? In the interminable soap-opera political life here one doubts that the answer will be supplied next week, but not that there will probably be a new twist further designed to confuse and excite. In all events, it is another sign of the lamentable sacrifice of principle to immediate end. And when, thinking in terms of Lebanon's place in Arabdom and its foreign policy, I asked someone the other day what he thought were Chamoun's real reasons for wanting re-election, the frankness of his answer startled me: "But he wants to be president. After all, it's very nice to be president!" And every now and then the idea suggests itself that this may be all there is to it, for everyone concerned.

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At the present writing the reconduction question is coming to a decision. The projected constitutional change must

be submitted to the Assembly for ratification before the end of the regular session on May 31. While ugly in such aspects as bomb-throwing, gun-running, and occasional assassination, the atmosphere has taken on in recent days a noticeable air of market-place bargaining in which everyone seems to know what the final price will be, but a great deal more rhetoric is on tap before an honorable settlement can be produced. The practically daily polls taken by different newspapers to count the deputies for and against renewal usually show the results they want: for the pro-Government papers Chamoun has some 50 (of 66) deputies -- he needs a two-thirds majority to change the constitution -- for the opposition journals there are at least 32 deputies against and the chances for reconduction grow constantly slimmer.

Of course, reconduction may be pressed and finally powered through a reluctant and docile Assembly; there are many coercive powers in the hands of the executive. But if it were, all the unpleasant implications of an incipient power state would reveal themselves, and it appears there are too many Lebanese opposed both to that and to the possible violent reactions of the opposition in the event of a showdown.

Increasingly, in connection with talk of easing internal tensions, the name of the head of the Army, Fuad Shihab, is mentioned as the one man who could incarnate a compromise solution for a short time. Shihab is perhaps the only leading Lebanese about whom a harsh word is never heard, and it is mainly owing to his insistence that Lebanon has been spared army interference in its political life, a fact which distinguishes it from most other Arab countries. When loyalist sources begin, as they are now doing, to ask who could represent the nation as a substitute candidate if the president were to withdraw, his name comes first to most people's minds.

At the opposite pole to re-election by force lies the alternative of outside interference in Lebanon, combined or not with internal upheaval. The threat is always there, and the constant inflow of arms to parts of the opposition is unsettling, but external tension between Lebanon and the United Arab Republic has eased a bit in recent weeks. And the Lebanese are the first to point out that just about every other country, and in particular the United States and the Soviet Union, have a vested interest in keeping Lebanon independent for their own reasons.

The crux of the present Lebanese crisis is to know on what solid rocks, beyond those of personal aggrandizement and intrigue, we can anchor our understanding of the country. There are probably three points on which a majority, but not always the same majority, of Lebanese would agree as essential to the nation:

- 1) Independence, but a real independence of something approaching neutrality, inspired by the Swiss model but with closer attachments to its neighbors and friends than Switzerland has. That this means renunciation of foreign aid "with strings" and

of the Eisenhower Doctrine is said on all sides; that it means renunciation of "disinterested" foreign aid, preferably from the West, is something that few Lebanese, with their sharp business sense, would accept;

2) Friendly and close relations with the Arab states with whom Lebanon must live, and in the particular with the U.A.R. There are economic necessities for one thing, and psychological problems for another. The search for a modus vivendi with the dynamic nationalism of Gamel Abdel Nasser, of a kind that would respect the uniqueness of Lebanon, is something which responsible leaders in their best moments acknowledge to be a formidable task but one which they know they must some day face up to. And even among the opposition leaders, there are few who want to throw themselves headlong into the arms of the Syro-Egyptian union, although they may be willing to play up Arab unity for all it is worth until the critical moment of choice arrives;

3) The keeping of the already strong cultural and social ties with the West as a counterbalance to a possible overdose of Arabism.

In the final analysis, it is the conflict of these three principles, which do so often clash and which have become especially antagonistic since the Suez crisis, that lies underneath all Lebanese political difficulties, including the present one. Indeed, the principles have hardly changed during the past century, since Lebanon first received its autonomy from the Turks in 1861. And it is heartening to keep in mind that, although the difficulties of finding a continuing solution that will keep some order in all the centrifugal elements of the society are more complex now than they were even a few years ago, the Lebanese are historically skilled in their specialty, and they are buttressed by a determined patriotism which is not to be underestimated.

As an example of how catching this spirit can be, take the case of a Syrian who came here several years ago as a refugee from one of his country's then chronic coups and settled in Beirut. "I am still a Syrian citizen legally," he told me. "But I now consider this my country. I can no longer live in Syria with conditions as they are and if real trouble came here I would fight to keep Lebanon free. Of course, I am in opposition to the government and there are many things wrong here, but I have learned what it is like to live in a free country."

Charles F. Gallagher