

BACKGROUND: This is the first 2 pages of my book about American diplomat Philip Habib, One Brief Miracle: the Diplomat, the Zealot, and the Wild Blundering Siege. The hardback edition (titled "Cursed is the Peacemaker") won the 2002 American Academy of Diplomacy book award. For more information about the book, including a sample chapter, see www.OneBriefMiracle.com.

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The East Room of the White House is a temple to high occasion, where all posture is perfect, all coughs are squelched, and all itches are left unscratched. On this Tuesday afternoon in September 1982, the Cabinet, the generals, and the diplomats had all come early to be sure to get a seat. Ronald Reagan had cut short his vacation to be here.

When the President and the First Lady appeared at the far end of the long red-carpeted entryway, a ruffle of polite applause began. But when the audience caught sight of the portly, balding man taking up the rear, the applause quickened, thickened, and lofted into a clamor rare for the East Room. The standing-room-only crowd started cheering. Some stuck their fingers in their mouths and whistled. As the party entered the room and stepped onto the stage, the soprano of whistles, the alto of applause, and the tenor of cheers were joined by a rumbling bass of feet stomping. The man stared resolutely forward. But as the din rose ever louder and went on for an embarrassingly long time, he lowered his head, and his facial muscles began to twitch. *Don't cry now, Philip*, thought his secretary. *Don't cry now. Be happy.*

For most of the past three months, American diplomat Philip Habib had been the world's most conspicuous failure. The Israeli army, in an effort to destroy the Palestine Liberation Organization once and for all, had been bombing the bloody hell out of the PLO's stronghold, the city of Beirut, Lebanon. The siege had degenerated into an aimless fiasco. Having gotten themselves into this unholy mess, neither the Israelis nor the PLO were willing to lose face to get themselves out of it. That was Philip Habib's lonely task. There were only two plausible outcomes: Either he would negotiate a peaceful end to the siege of Beirut, or Israeli soldiers would wade into the catacombs of the city and kill and kill and kill and kill and kill. As the well-entrenched PLO fought back, countless thousands of Israelis, Palestinians, and Lebanese would die.

To prevent that bloodbath, he would have to persuade some of the most intransigent zealots on earth to make decisions they feared would cost them their principles, their political careers, even their lives. He would have to persuade implacable enemies to cooperate, paranoids to trust, ditherers to commit. Written off by many people as a Quixote and pitied by many others as a Sisyphus, Habib struck out at nearly every turn.

But in the end he had worked out an unprecedented solution to this unprecedented crisis. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, and now he was about to become the first career diplomat ever to receive America's highest civilian honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

At the East Room podium, Reagan said, "His successful negotiation of the cease-fire in Lebanon and the resolution of the West Beirut crisis stands out as one of the unique feats of diplomacy in modern times. Ambassador Habib's efforts conducted in the most difficult and trying of circumstances . . . saved the city of Beirut and thousands of innocent lives." Reagan concluded by turning to Habib and saying, "In addition to the Medal of Freedom, Phil, you have earned a title beyond our power to bestow. You are a peacemaker."

When the ceremony ended, Habib turned to his wife, Marjorie, and said "Not bad for a boy from Brooklyn."