THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION
BROOKINGS CAFETERIA: Beirut 1958: America' first Middle East intervention
Friday, November 1, 2019

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(Music)

DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, the podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews.

In July 1958, U.S. Marines stormed the beaches of Beirut, Lebanon, ready for combat in the midst of an escalating sectarian crisis in the country. But, they were greeted by sunbathers and vendors selling shawarma. The rest of their mission went mostly peacefully. But, future American interventions did not go so well.

In his new book, published by the Brookings Institution Press, titled *Beirut 1958: How America's Wars in the Middle East Began*, Senior Fellow Bruce Riedel tells the story of the first U.S. combat operation in the Middle East and the lessons it continues to hold for today's policymakers.

In his conversation today with Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Press, Riedel brings a personal perspective to the story, as his father was a United Nations official stationed in the region when the Marines arrived. Also on today's program, Senior Fellow Molly Reynolds explains what's happening in Congress.

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Recent episodes include a conversation with Jung Pak on how to manage North Korea, and Dany Bahar on how to repair Venezuela's shattered economy. Bruce Riedel was a guest on the first episode of And Now the Hard Part, talking about resetting the U.S.

relationship with Saudi Arabia. Find And Now the Hard Part at foreignpolicy.com/podcasts or on your podcast app. And, now, here's Bill Finan with Bruce Riedel.

FINAN: Fred, thank you. Bruce, good to see you again.

RIEDEL: Good to see you.

FINAN: Your newest book is the story of American's first intervention in the modern Middle East, the invasion of Lebanon in 1958 and what it means for us today. But, first, what exactly happened on July 15, 1958?

RIEDEL: It was the first time American troops mounted a combat operation in the Middle East. Today, we're used to American troops being in combat constantly in the Middle East. Before 1958, it had never happened. The actual invasion on July 15th had elements of comic opera to it.

The Marines went ashore assuming that this was a replay of D-Day. And, the Wehrmacht was going to be waiting for them on the Normandy beach. In fact, what was waiting for them on the beach was Lebanese sunbathers, Lebanese vendors. And, as the Marines stormed up the beach, Lebanese vendors stormed down the beach, selling cigarettes and Coca Cola and shawarma and things like that.

But, behind the kind of comic opera part was deadly serious. Offshore there were three American carrier combat groups. And, in Germany, the U.S. Army was preparing to lift nuclear weapons to the beachhead in Beirut. Fortunately, it didn't turn out to be a disaster like so many of our combat operations since, largely because the American ambassador on the scene came up with a deal.

The fiction was created that we were there at the invitation of the Lebanese Army and were, therefore, their guests and were being escorted everywhere. And, behind that

fiction was enough cover that things were allowed to calm down, and after a few months the American Marines left. Only one American soldier died in combat. So, the first combat operation has a good ending, but many of those that followed didn't fall into that same suit.

FINAN: Right. I was thinking of the fact that you mentioned the one Marine who was killed was killed by a sniper, far fewer casualties than what happened when the Marines came back again. There was a terrorist bombing at the Marine barracks.

RIEDEL: Yeah, I think there was a tendency to assume Beirut 1958 was the model and that we could do things like that in the future with the same relative loss of pain. Turned out to be Beirut 1958 was the anomaly. This was the case that moved against the current of what we could find in Beirut in 1983, or Iraq in 2003, or the war in Afghanistan since 2002.

FINAN: We'll come back near the end to talk about the lessons that, as you point out, can be learned from 1958. I want to talk a little bit about the actual events that led to the Marines storming the beach to be greeted by vendors selling them cigarettes and shawarma.

You told a story of the entwined events that led to the Marines coming to Beirut, and central to that story is the Suez Crisis and a charismatic leader. Can you tell us about that and him?

RIEDEL: Gamal Abdel Nasser was the most popular man in the Arab world in the 1950s. He had stood up to the British and French and Israelis in 1956 over the Suez Crisis. He had nationalized the Suez Canal. His name was chanted by crowds over and over again. He was very telegenic. He was a magnificent speaker. And, at the beginning of 1958 he

achieved probably his greatest success, when Syria and Egypt united together in the United Arab Republic.

The creation of the United Arab Republic created almost panic in the Eisenhower administration. It was assumed that this was the beginning, that other Arab states would rapidly join the new UAR, as it was called. And, it was assumed that Nasser was a stalking horse for the Soviet Union and communism in Russia. In fact, he had a much more complicated relationship with Russia, but he was closer to the Russians than any Arab leader had been before.

So, what the Eisenhower administration saw facing it was a charismatic leader intent upon uniting the United Arab world which would have meant taking over, sooner or later, the oil supplies of the Arab world and presenting a united front against Israel. Then, over the course of the summer, the spring and the summer, a kind of series of conspiracies ripened and came to closure, all of which added to the sense, in the Eisenhower administration, of gloom and doom and that the end was coming and they had to "do something." And, what they ended up doing was invading Lebanon.

FINAN: Can you pull back for a moment and kind of paint the picture of the geopolitics that were playing out here at this time, too? We have oil, as you mentioned. You have Israel, as you mentioned. We have the Soviet Union, as you mentioned. We have United States and its Western allies, as it were. And, all those were coming into play, too, in some way, right?

RIEDEL: Right. And, the Cold War, the struggle with Moscow dominated everything, particularly in the Eisenhower administration. His secretary of state is director of Central Intelligence, the Dulles brothers.

FINAN: Allen and John Foster.

RIEDEL: Allen and John Foster, who were obsessed with the Soviet Union, particularly John Foster. And, they saw conspiracies everywhere. And, there are enough conspiracies that they had reason to be concerned, but in the summer of 1958, as I say in the book, they more or less panicked. They thought that the coup that took place in Iraq on July 14, 1958 had to be inspired and run by Nasser and behind that by Moscow, or wasn't.

These conspirators were dancing to their own tune and had no intention of joining the United Arab Republic. They just freed themselves from what they saw as a British-controlled monarchy. They didn't want to join now an Egyptian-controlled police state. But, they didn't see that. They thought that this conspiracy meant that the cascade of countries joining the UAR was about to begin and they needed to respond. Invading Iraq to give credit to the Eisenhower administration seemed like a loony idea.

FINAN: Mm-hmm.

RIEDEL: We now know how right they were about that. Lebanon, being a much smaller country, seemed a much easier place to operate, and Lebanon was in the midst of a civil war between the Christians and Muslims, which is, frankly, Lebanon's almost continuous history. We intervened, allegedly, to keep the Christian president in office, but in the end we were the instrument by which he was moved out of office, and another Christian who was much more acceptable to the Muslims was put in office.

So, we were lucky that we could come up with a deal that more or less sorted the whole problem out, and it became clear that the Iraq revolution was not about Arab nationalism, it was about Iraqi nationalism, and events calmed down. And, Eisenhower wisely at that point brought the troops home.

FINAN: One of the more lasting elements to emerge out of this was the Eisenhower Doctrine that you talk about in the book, too. And, you say this became a crucial milestone for America's engagement in the Middle East. And, the Eisenhower Doctrine was --

RIEDEL: The Eisenhower Doctrine recognized, first of all, the importance of the Middle East to the United States. And, it's interesting what Eisenhower talked about. He said, obviously, about oil. That's a no-brainer. He also said it was home to the three great religions, and that in the Cold War we could not let atheist communism dominate the homelands of the three great monotheistic religions.

The thing that he didn't' talk about was Israel. It's almost inconceivable for any American president since not to include Israel as one of our key reasons for being in the region. And, then he pledged that the United States would support any country that was facing communist aggression.

Communist aggression, of course, was defined in the 1950s as pretty broad. Nasser was communist aggression, even though Nasser was by no means a communist and he was by no means a pawn of the Russians. But, he was perceived to be tilting towards Russia and the Cold War and, therefore, our enemy.

FINAN: It seems that international communism was the main focus for Eisenhower defeating or curtailing it. Was it, though, really such a potent, malevolent factor in the region?

RIEDEL: The Soviet Union was a newcomer to the region, really. It had only started becoming involved in 1956 with the big arms sales to Egypt by its client state, Czechoslovakia, and it was beginning to sell arms to Syria and other countries. The Dulles brothers magnified the power of the Soviet Union considerably.

Of course, it is also important to note that the first thing Nasser did after the Marines went ashore in Lebanon was he flew to Moscow. So, he more or less played into their conspiracy minds by running to see what the Russians intended to do in response. And, the Russians' response was: Americans have invaded Beirut. We're not going to do anything about that. If they invade Egypt, that's something different. But, Beirut, we're not going to respond to that.

FINAN: The book is filled with illustrations of the various characters, various personalities that are part of the conspiracy that was so real that led to this, and it's worth reading on that alone, just to get a sense of the rich cast of characters. But, there's also something here that I found interesting and delightful in some ways, and it's a personal story in the book. You and your family, you were there at this time. Can you tell us about how you and your parents were a part of this story?

RIEDEL: My father served in the U.S. Army in World War II. And, after the war he joined the United Nations, literally, as it was being set up in the late 1940s, got a job in the U.N. And, shortly after I was born -- I was 2 years old -- he took an assignment working in Jerusalem. At the time, East Jerusalem was part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

So, I remember vividly, when I was quite young, crowds of Palestinians surging past our house, chanting Gamal Abdel Nasser, Gamal Abdel Nasser, only then to clash with the Jordanian police. And, after a couple of years in Jerusalem, he was re-assigned to Beirut, and this was before the Cold War began.

Beirut in the 1950s was called the Paris of the Middle East, and it really was. It is a beautiful city. You can go skiing in the morning and sailing in the afternoon. The Lebanese are great chefs. It was really nice duty until the Civil War began. When the Civil War began,

we began coming under fire. There would be snipers shooting in the neighborhoods. It just wasn't safe anymore.

And, as soon as the Marines landed, my mother, myself, and my brother were evacuated out of the country to Naples, Italy. Nice duty if you can get it, again. It must have been quite a burden for my mother to have a teenage boy and a toddler. And, then, once the Lebanese crisis died down, we came back to Lebanon and stayed there another 2 years.

FINAN: You end the book talking about the four central lessons that you said can be learned from this American intervention in Lebanon, and that should help us, guide us in any of our further interventions, if there are any. What are those four lessons?

RIEDEL: Well, I think the most important is to not panic. The Middle East is full of conspiracies, some of which succeed, some of which we prevent. In the book, for example, I describe how this CIA uncovered a plot to overthrow King Hussein in Jordan and successfully thwarted that plot. You should expect the unexpected, and always let a little time go by before you respond.

Clearly, in the case of 9/11, the United States needed to respond. But, even then, the Bush administration took its time before it started the war in Afghanistan. You're always going to get surprises. See them through a little bit. It became clear in 1958, within a week, that Iraq wasn't joining the United Arab Republic and that Lebanon was not about to fall into the United Arab Republic, either. We didn't in the end need to have intervened. And, if we'd paused and taken our time, that probably would have been the outcome.

Another crucial lesson is: Listen to your people on the ground. They actually, often times, know more about what's going on than anyone else. We were very fortunate to have a great ambassador in Beirut in 1958 and people in the State Department, underneath

John Foster Dulles, who appreciated his advice and basically adopted it as their own once the Marines were ashore.

FINAN: You had a couple others, too. Don't mislead the American public.

RIEDEL: Eisenhower went into Beirut saying this was standing up to international communism and that this was a Munich-like moment. In other words, if we didn't act here in 1958 Lebanon, we would be like the British and French, failing to respond to Hitler in the Sudetenland and Czechoslovakia in 1938. It couldn't have been further from the truth. This was not a Soviet-inspired aggression. And, within the administration, there were people smart enough to know the complexities of this who should have come up with a more honest rationale for the American people.

When you mislead the American people about why you send their sons and daughters into combat, it always comes back to haunt you. The truth will come out. And, in this first combat operation, unfortunately, it was all over before the digging into the reality was done by the media and specialists. And, as I said, it was only one dead. It was a relatively painless operation.

What we've discovered since then is that that's not the norm in the Middle East. In the Middle East you get bogged down in a quagmire, and it's very hard to get out. It's very hard to persuade the American people why you went in there if it was under false pretenses, like looking for weapons of mass destruction (Inaudible) --

FINAN: Yeah.

RIEDEL: -- in 2002.

FINAN: And, the fourth lesson mentioned in the book is -- and it seems very apropos at this moment -- be careful of what you hear from your allies in the region.

RIEDEL: Exactly. When we went into Lebanon, the British, a few days later, sent troops into Jordan in order to buck up King Hussein. As they flew in over Israel, Israel denied them air clearance, wouldn't let them fly in. And, the Eisenhower administration had to weigh in very heavily with the Israeli leadership to allow overflights so that the British troops in Jordan could be re-supplied.

Our other ally, the Saudis, the logical place to go if you needed oil for the Jordanian economy, the Saudis wouldn't provide oil, either. So, our two closest allies in the region refused to support an operation carried out by our oldest friend, the British, working in tandem with the United States. That's a good example that, yes, our allies are allies, but they also have their own interests, and they may not always accord with us when it comes to moments of crisis.

So, listen to them, but be skeptical about how much they'll deliver when you really need them. And, I think that's the perfect question to be answering today with the new crisis between Iran and Saudi Arabia. How much are the Saudis really going to deliver if this comes to blows, and how much are they basically going to fight to the last American?

FINAN: Bruce, thank you very much for coming by today to talk about your new book, *Beirut 1958: How America's Wars in the Middle East Began.*

RIEDEL: Thank you. I appreciate it.

DEWS: Here's Senior Fellow Molly Reynolds with another edition of what's happening in Congress.

REYNOLDS: I'm Molly Reynolds, Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution. Five weeks after Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced that the House of Representatives will be moving forward with an official impeachment inquiry into President

Trump, the House of Representatives agreed to a resolution outlining procedures to be used by the Chamber in its investigation going forward.

This vote was almost entirely along party lines. All Republicans and two Democrats opposed the measure. And, only Justin Amash of Michigan, an Independent who left the Republican Party earlier this year, crossed party lines to support it. The resolution represents the first time the full House has cast a vote related to the unfolding impeachment inquiry. But, importantly, the Chamber did not need to hold a vote in order to continue the investigation.

Both the Constitution and the Rules of the House are largely silent on the specifics of what an impeachment inquiry must look like and do not require an authorizing vote of the full House for one to begin. A federal judge held the same recently as part of a lower court decision in House Democrats lawsuit, seeking access to the grand jury materials from Special Counsel Robert Mueller's investigation for interference in the 2016 election.

So, if the house didn't need to vote, why do so? There are several reasons, some substantive and some political. First, the resolution does implement some procedures that differ from the House's existing rules, most notably it provides for a longer period of uninterrupted questioning to be exercised at the start of hearings by the Intelligence and Judiciary Committees, by committee leaders of both parties or staff. It is currently permitted under the House rules.

Democrats hope that allowing for up to 45 minutes of uninterrupted questioning in a public setting would give them an opportunity to lay out facts and arguments more clearly. In addition, there are a number of features of the current impeachment inquiry that differ from the prior or modern-era impeachment investigations of Presidents Nixon and Clinton the Democrats needed to address and voting on a resolution to lay out procedural specifics was

one option for doing so.

The nature of the material being investigated, for example, has meant that the Intelligence Committee has been the appropriate venue for conducting witness interviews. Other committees, including Foreign Affairs and Oversight, have also been conducting relevant investigations throughout the year. But, the Judiciary Committee is the panel with jurisdiction over presidential impeachments. Establishing an orderly process for how those various committees will work together moving forward, as the resolution aims to do, will reduce uncertainty for members as the inquiry unfolds.

Beyond providing some order to the next steps in the inquiry, the resolution also has the potential to undercut some process-related complaints that Republicans have levied that the Democrats approach. While Republicans may find new and different aspects of the process to criticize, the resolution does address some of their previous concerns.

The top Republican members of the Intelligence and Judiciary Committees can, for example, request to issue subpoenas. And, if the Democratic chairs object, the Republicans can force the full committees to vote on this question. These procedures, along with those related to procedural rights for the President and his lawyers as part of committee hearings, are largely similar to those used in the Clinton and Nixon cases.

Perhaps the biggest departure from these earlier precedents is a provision that allows the Judiciary Committee to pursue "appropriate remedies" if the President unlawfully refuses to allow witnesses to testify approved documents. These remedies include but are not necessarily limited to denying the President or his lawyers the ability to call or question witnesses.

While it's unclear how this provision would actually be exercised and to what effect, it

clearly represents an effort by the House to increase their leverage vis-à-vis the Executive Branch in fights over testimony and documents going forward. Impeachment isn't just about process, however. It's also about politics, and so is Democrats' decision to hold a vote on the procedures for the inquiry.

Different segments of the Democratic Caucus have staked out different positions on impeachment over the course of the year. But, Speaker Pelosi and her leadership team were able to build near-unanimous support in their party for the measure. Now, members who have supported impeachment all along can get credit for having a vote on it. And, legislators who've been more reluctant can frame the vote as merely the logical next step in an investigation with a still unclear end.

Republicans, meanwhile, have already begun to emphasize the fact that the vote wasn't quite unanimous, foreshadowing the partisanship that's likely to drive the rest of the inquiry, as it remains the highest profile matter happening in Congress.

DEWS: The Brookings Cafeteria Podcast is the product of an amazing team of colleagues, starting with audio engineer Gaston Reboredo and producer Chris McKenna. Bill Finan, Director of the Brookings Institution Press does the book interviews, and Lisette Baylor and Eric Abalahin provide design and web support. Our intern this fall is Eowyn Fain. Finally, my thanks to Camilo Ramirez and Emily Horne for their guidance and support.

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