Richard Curtiss has died at the age of 85, having enjoyed a life of great accomplishment. He was the founding editor and principal writer of The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs and, just before that, in 1981, the co-founder of this organization. He had turned to creating a space for the frank discussion of the role of Israel in U.S. politics after a distinguished career in journalism and government — 30 years in the U.S. Foreign Service. There his role was explaining to foreigners the often inexplicable: an American policy in the Middle East that seemed to run counter to the interests of the nation. When he left government, he took up the Sisyphean task of helping to create the environment for a change in that policy.

Dick’s first book, written in the very office suite where he now sit, was A Changing Image: American Perceptions of the Arab-Israeli Conflict. Hopes were rising: the Camp David Accords had been signed by Israel and Egypt in 1978, and Israel had not yet invaded Lebanon to finish off Yasser Arafat’s Palestine Liberation Organization (see Bill Quandt on today’s peace possibilities, p. 7). Years later, Dick would fasten his prodigious intellect on the basic problem: Stealth PACs: Lobbying Congress for Control of U.S. Middle East Policy. He named names, listing the members who were on the Israel Lobby’s payroll and for how much (spoiler alert: a great many).

The early 1980s were a time of soul-searching for some Jews in America, watching nightly television footage of Israel’s bombing of Beirut, and reading reports about the IDF’s enabling the slaughter of women and children in the nearby Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. Ironically, the PLO fighters were allowed to leave the country under American guard, with their weapons, for refuge in Tunis (the Rabin government allowed them to come home to Palestine when the Oslo accords were signed in 1993). Soon after the PLO left, the U.S. Marine barracks at the Beirut airport were blown up by a suicide truck bomber, taking 241 Americans with him. A shocked President Reagan pulled U.S. forces out of that fray and into a Caribbean “war” — remember Grenada? It is doubtful President Carter would have been allowed to get away with such cutting and running after a “terrorist” atrocity. Reagan had the option of putting boots on the ground but thought better of it.

The 9/11 al-Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon gave President Bush the opportunity for revenge, conflating the interests of the United States and Israel and trying to remake the Middle East. That led to the Obama retracement now in progress: No more land wars in Asia, whether east or southwest. To underline the point, Chuck Hagel was picked to head the Pentagon — a man the president considered to be on his wavelength re boots on the ground. Obama had already stood firm against arming the Syrian rebels. Many officers of his administration were in favor of taking a greater role: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, CIA Director David Petraeus and Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey, to name only the principals. But fate spelled it in: General Petraeus resigned over adultery and the others have chosen to retire.

Incoming with Hagel is John Kerry as secretary of state, whose opposition to the Vietnam quagmire is well known. It is impressive that the president stood firm against both liberal interventionists and neoconservatives exhorting him to do something, anything. The cost...