

MANIPULATION FOR THE MASSES

Alexander Haig is a difficult man. Many people disagree about the former Secretary of State's policies, or his actions as White House chief of staff when the Nixon administration was crumbling, or the wisdom and morality of concealing presidential aspirations while serving another president as his secretary of state. But there is a broad consensus on the issue of his personality. Bombastic, domineering, moody, abrasive, arrogant with a pompous and ambiguous way of expressing himself, Haig is a walking bundle of rasping character traits, and even his political supporters concede: Alexander Haig is a difficult man.

In January 1982, after having been at the State Department for just one year, reports of his tantrums and power plays were a principal topic of conversation in the Washington corridors where politicians, bureaucrats and journalists operated. Possibly -- quite likely -- these stories were accelerated by his plentiful enemies in the White House coterie around Ronald Reagan and the rumors began to take on a more sinister note. Haig, the stories went, was not only difficult, he was a bit dotty, which is not a good thing to have in a Secretary of State, especially one serving under a removed, laid back president.

? The public evidence that was cited in these rumors was his hyperventilated appearance -- "I'm in control here" -- before the Washington press corps on the day that Reagan was shot and lay near death in a hospital five blocks away. There were the Washington stories, becoming legends on the cocktail circuit,

about how he refused to fly to Brussels aboard the windowless version of the Boeing 707 reserved for cabinet officers and insisted that Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger switch planes with him. There were other stories of Haig figuratively frothing at the mouth and chewing the rug at the morning staff meetings at the State Department. These accounts frequently cited his coronary bypass operation, and suggested he might be in the grips of the medication that he took as a therapeutic followup. In fact the usual medications, including aspirin and suppressants of adrenalin, would tend to make recipients less prone to erratic behavior, if anything, but the rumors persisted.

In recognition of the rumors, Haig held an interview with James Reston of The New York Times to directly address the subject that Washington was whispering about. Reston raising the "distasteful" questions, was informed by Haig that he was perfectly sane and that he was taking no medication as the result of his bypass. Reston, ever polite, neglected to ask the obvious followup, "So why do you act that way?" and the rumors continued to run. Haig decided to use a more subtle, powerful weapon -- the leak.

Word had reached The Washington Post about Haig's erratic behavior. As one of the editors described it, the Post believed that the available evidence was that Haig was suffering "something like a nervous breakdown." The Post assigned its premier investigative reporter, Bob Woodward, to the story which had the effect of raising the stakes. Going to the State Department, Woodward used a form of reporters blackmail: he said that he was

working on a story about Haig's behavior and had come to the conclusion that the stories were true. Unless the State Department could supply evidence to counter that, he was going with the story that Haig was more than eccentric, he was showing signs similar to the symptoms of an approaching nervous breakdown.

This produced the desired reaction and, in fact, coincided with Haig's desire to lay the rumors to rest. For the first time in State Department history, an outsider was handed for publication, by an anonymous official near the top of the department, one of the most closely guarded secrets in the administration. They were notes, unofficial but clearly authoritative, of several of the Secretary's morning meetings, the 8:30 am session in the conference room in the Secretary's suite on the seventh floor where the heads of the bureaus talked about the overnight intelligence and the problems to be dealt with in the course of the day.

The notes were interesting, even a bit scandalous. There was Haig calling Lord Carrington, his British counterpart, a "duplicitous bastard" and Haig discussing a new arms sale to Saudi Arabia. If there was any real theme to the notes, it was that Haig was truly in charge; swiftly moving across the geo-political agenda, he dealt with problem after problem, with wit, decisiveness and toughness. He impressively dominated the proceedings, according to the notes, showing balance and a vast, detailed knowledge of the global situation.

When the Post printed Woodward's story, there were the expected cries of outrage over this terrible leak, but even in this moment of duress, Haig - talking to reporters at a news

conference in Bal Harbor, Fla. - showed warmth and intelligence, more evidence that he was not off his rocker, as the Washington rumor mongers were saying. "Henry Kissinger had his Oriana Fallaci," Haig said, in a reference to the Italian interviewer who managed to get Kissinger to hang himself publicly in an extended conversation. "And I have my loyal staff," Haig noted with irony and control.

The next day, Dean Fischer, assistant secretary of State for Public Affairs and Haig's spokesman, announced there would be a full-scale investigation to uncover the course of this deplorable leak of information. No leaker was ever found and the story disappeared, just one more brief bubble on the surface of the Washington broth, leaving behind only the vague impression that Haig was one tough secretary of state, no crazier than your average fox.

And yet, there was something fishy about this episode. For one thing, the notes of the highly classified morning meeting at the State Department, while titillating, really contained nothing that was new or even secret. Even the remark about the British foreign secretary being duplicitous was part of a running, half-serious feud between the two men. In Brussels, several months earlier, Haig had made the same assessment, in even more Haig-ian terms. He told a group of reporters that Carrington was guilty of "habitual adjectival inaccuracy." The Saudi arms deal had already been thoroughly leaked from Capitol Hill. All of the other factual information in the Post story was either old or trivial.

Another odd thing: the full-scale investigation never took place. A search of the records of the State Department, under a Freedom of Information request by the author, turned up not one piece of paper about the search for the leaker. Nobody was interviewed and the Security branch was not called or informed about the "investigation." This leads to the logical conclusion that Fischer and Haig were not interested in finding the leaker, and more likely, knew who had put together the curious, secretless handwritten notes of the Haig meeting.

A leak, given to one of the world's premier investigative reporters, had done more to establish Haig's reputation for sturdy mental health than any number of press releases or television appearances. The White House leakists had been outflanked and outsmarted, for once, although they finally got Haig removed about six months later, partly through a series of leaks and plants that suggested that the President had lost his confidence in his abrasive vicar of foreign policy.

It was Haig, as inventive as he was obstinate, who added a new variation of the leak in order to protect his foreign aid budget from OMB director David Stockman's axe, effectively insulating the State Department from the Reagan Revolution (and thus adding to the monumental federal budget deficit). When Stockman sent Haig a proposed list of drastic foreign aid cuts that were going to be imposed in 1981, Haig's State Department sent out warnings to all its embassies overseas (according to Stockman, suggesting that the embassies might want to alert their host governments which, in turn, might want to mobilize their embassies

in Washington to lobby on Capitol Hill and in the White House to reverse the savage cuts which would alter forever the course of American diplomacy and -- not incidentally -- infringe on Al Haig's turf as director of U.S. foreign policy.

This double carom leakmanship was given an added fillip by the master craftsman (again according to Stockman) when Haig strode into Stockman's office to debate the budget cuts and began by saying accusingly he was "shocked" by the leaks, suggesting that it was Stockman who had undercut himself with the elaborate web of advance reports to foreign governments. The maneuver worked and the cuts in foreign aid did not take place, at least not while Al Haig was in charge at the State Department.

Haig, as an old Washington hand, knew and used the techniques of those who came before him. His interview with James Reston, in which The New York Times was used to certify his mental stability was a variation of a much more elaborate ploy once used by Grand Master J. Edgar Hoover at the FBI.

The agency, in 1966, was under almost constant pressure and much of it came from its performance -- or lack of ardor -- in the investigation of the John F. Kennedy assassination. The stores were full of books with conspiracy theories, some of them half-baked some of them not. All, to some extent, involved criticism of Hoover's FBI, particularly its apparently unquestioning acceptance of the bungled autopsy report done in Dallas on the president's body. Hoover was getting fed up and called on his general handyman and fixer with the press, Cartha DeLoach to do something about it.

Extra
Museum →

DeLoach. imaginative as always, knew that newspapers, especially competitive newspapers in financial trouble, love exclusives. So, according to FBI documents which supply an ample paper trail, DeLoach suggested that Hoover respond to the request of a respectable newspaper editor to make a statement about the FBI's role in the Kennedy investigation and make available a record of the agency's Herculean labors, including some 25,000 interviews. There was a slight problem. There was no such request outstanding from any respected news organization and, even if such a request were to be received there was no assurance that the FBI statement would be run intact, or even run at all.

For DeLoach, that was a minor difficulty. He got in touch with Sidney Epstein, City Editor of the Washington Evening Star, the struggling afternoon newspaper which was then in the process of being driven into the ground by the more aggressive morning paper, The Washington Post. DeLoach, ever efficient, did more than suggest that Epstein write Hoover. He first drafted a letter that Epstein would sign and send to Hoover. Then he had Hoover, as well as Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, who was then the FBI's and Lyndon Johnson's best friend on the high court, approve the text of the letter. Once approved by Hoover and Fortas, the letter was taken to Epstein by a messenger just before the third anniversary of the assassination, and he duly signed it on November 21, 1966. He also agreed to run the resulting Hoover statement on Friday, November 26 on the front page of The Star (in negotiations with DeLoach, the FBI decided against running it on November 25, Thanksgiving Day, since that was a bad day for an

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evening paper dependent on newstand and commuter sales. The Star, in turn, negotiated an agreement in which its reporter, Jeremiah O'Leary, would be given access to FBI officials to do a story about the investigation).

The letter which was re-typed on Star stationery and signed by Epstein, sounded like it was written by the government. Certainly it is like no other written by any newspaper city editor, ever, anywhere:

"Dear Mr. Hoover:

"I have noted with considerable concern the recent rash of books, articles and statements which are creating confusion and doubts about the validity of the findings of the Warren Commission regarding the assassination of President Kennedy. Much of the criticism has been directed at the conduct of the Commission's inquiry. Certain conclusions reached by the Commission have been questioned and new theories advanced as to what actually happened.

"These critics have used various interpretations of evidence collected by the Commission and alleged conflicts in information reported to the Commission to support their theories. One of the 'conflicts' concerns the alleged variance of the results of the medical examination of the President's body, recorded in FBI reports dated December 9, 1963 and January 13, 1964, and the official autopsy report.

"I realize you have not taken issue with any of the people who have questioned the Warren Commission inquiry and the conclusions resulting from it. I realize also you must restrict your remarks to matters relating solely to the FBI's role in the

investigation. I believe, however, that a statement from you at this time regarding the alleged conflict between information reported by the FBI and the autopsy will greatly help in clearing up the confusion and setting the record straight.

"Naturally, I would want permission to publish your statement.

Sincerely yours,

Sidney Epstein

City Editor"

Not surprisingly, Hoover responded with a generous statement, defending the FBI and noting that two of the people in the room at the time of the autopsy were FBI agents.

There's an ironic post-script to this episode. A free-lance investigative reporter and author, Harold Weisberg, heard about the transaction between the FBI and The Evening Star and asked the FBI for a copy of the press release which was sent to Epstein and which was printed in the Star some nine months earlier. Weisberg received only silence in reply.

Later, he used the Freedom of Information act to get the press release (!) and with it was a memo from one of Hoover's assistants, D.C. Morrell. A memo noted that Weisberg was the author of a book entitled "Whitewash -- The Report of the Warren Report (sic)" which was described in the FBI memo as "a vitriolic and daboical criticism of the President's commission, the FBI, the Secret Service, police agencies and other branches of the government relating to the assassination investigation."

In view of his past criticism, the FBI memo recommended that

Weisber's letter not be answered or acknowledged, and he finally had to get the publicity release through the cumbersome FOI channel.

In the wake of the assassination, the FBI went practically into the book publishing and editing business, answering criticism, blunting attacks and imparting its own spin to the various versions of the truth that appeared in the torrent of books about the assassination.

One of the bigger books was Jim Bishop's "The Day JFK was Shot," one in his series of best-selling chronological accounts of historic events. It is not unusual for authors and journalists to go back to their sources and check certain facts, but Bishop went beyond the usual and submitted the whole manuscript to the FBI, which sent back a detailed critique that was so thorough that Cartha DeLoach might have accurately been listed on the title page as co-author, or at least editor, suggesting cuts or revisions, even some based on good taste and respect for the president, such as:

"On page 245, paragraph 2, you made comments concerning Mrs. Johnson and her opinion of Mrs. Kennedy and you also set forth Mrs. Kennedy's opinion of Mrs. Johnson as follows: 'If Lyndon asked, I think Lady Bird would walk down Pennsylvania Avenue naked.' Although I am not aware of where you may have obtained this quotation, I thought I would mention it since the possibility exists the general reader may take exception to this comment."

Most of the suggested corrections were involved in protecting the FBI's image, such as: "On page 325, you made references to

Marina Oswald stating she, too, felt hostile to the FBI. You said, "In a free country, it did not seem just to be harassed by secret police." I believe 'secret police' should be deleted and it would be preferable to use police instead."

Some of the comments by the FBI were stylistic, but with the apparent aim of reinforcing the FBI's image: "In connection with the comments between (FBI special agent) Hosty and (Dallas police Lt. Jack) Revill, you utilized a footnote which said this was 'Revill's notion of a conversation.' I may suggest, Jim, that rather than using the footnote the comment actually be included in the text which probably would have greater clarification of what transpired." *Check what Bishop said with later Hosty disclosures*

The FBI arranged interviews for Bishop, produced documents and then finally helped edit the final product. It is not mentioned in the acknowledgements in the front of his book. (Need to check this). 2-22-87

Bishop-Dallas