

2 Men at the Eye of the Watergate Storm

Haig: Sense of Foreboding

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Shortly after Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. assumed his new command in the Watergate-battered White House last May he confessed a sense of foreboding to a friend and former colleague.

"I feel as though I've taken over a battalion that has just been overrun," he said.

Little has happened since to dispel that sense, of siege, particularly in the period since the weekend of what has become known as the "firestorm" in late October, marked by the triple exodus of Archibald Cox, Elliot L.

Richardson and William D. Ruckelshaus.

As the White House political defense perimeter has shrunk under the unrelenting fire of new revelations and new challenges to presidential credibility, so Haig's silhouette has grown as Richard Nixon's point man, his lead rifle.

Haig reflected on this during a conversation in his office Saturday evening.

"Very few men who have occupied that chair," he pointed across the room toward his desk, "have been

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able to escape political taint and smear. There are few who haven't been skewered."

He called the roll of some past occupants: Sherman Adams, Walter Jenkins, Bob Haldeman.

"I wasn't naive about it when I came in and I'm not today. You just try to keep from being drawn in. Maybe it won't happen to you. Maybe you won't detect the moment when it begins to happen to you..."

His friend and Democratic mentor, Joseph Califano, said this of Haig:

"I think he's being eaten up. He's being put through a political and moral shredder. It's tough to see a friend go down that way. Nixon, in searching for a way out of Watergate, could destroy Haig."

Outwardly, Haig's vaulting career in the Nixon White House would seem to be a triumph of the work ethic, the West Point Code and the American dream.

He walked into the White House West Basement nearly five years ago with an impeccable military career and the rank of colonel to work in the bureaucratic sweat shop of Henry Kissinger's National Security Council staff.

There was an unending

stretch of 13-14-15-hour days—six and seven days a week—in an atmosphere of perpetual deadline.

And now he holds the status of a retired four-star general and his spacious official quarters are separated by only a few carpeted feet from the Oval Office of the President of the United States. Although Haig demurs, there are those familiar with White House structure who say his influence ranges over a far broader area of policy—particularly in foreign affairs and national security—than did Bob Haldeman's.

And so . . . *being eaten up? Going through a shredder?*

Such conjecture has only begun to surface since the weekend of the "firestorm" and Haig's involvement in the Watergate campaign began to surface publicly.

In the view of Califano, who has personally experienced the man-eating demands of the presidency, "Nixon is now in a situation which affects the very marrow of his career and his place in history. No one is doing anything that he has not been told to do by the President. And that is true of Haig more than anyone. He has been forced into a political role. And that is unfortunate."

Haig is aware of the Watergate undertow swirling around his ankles, the familiar pressure that has presaged the undoing of so many in the Nixon administration, his immediate predecessor among them.

"I've gone into battle where the stakes have been more definitive and the outcome less significant than this," Haig tells you in flat, patient tones. "I could have been dead in Korea or Vietnam or elsewhere. But the outcome would have been less significant than this."

And what might be the outcome of the Watergate campaign?

"To contribute to national sanity. To restore a sense of confidence in the office (the voice lingers on that word and the eyes seem to ask if you got it) of the

presidency . . . To show that the presidency is an institution that should not be lightly tampered with, that it is fundamental to the American system."

It is unclear precisely when Haig was assigned his major tactical command in the Battle of Watergate. But his imprint was already on the events on the Monday of the week, Oct. 15, that was to culminate in what has become known as the Saturday Night Massacre.

It was on that day, he has acknowledge, that the firing of Special Prosecutor Cox was raised at a high-level White House conference with then: Attorney General Richardson in attendance. During that meeting Richardson served notice he would be prepared to resign if Cox were to be sacked by the President.

"I was, incidentally, against that approach," Haig volunteered. It was, for the time being, rejected.

Through that week Haig emerged as the President's chief bureaucratic head-knocker within the administration on the Cox affair and the confrontation of the tapes, Richardson's log showed five telephone calls from Haig on Tuesday, Oct. 16.

The Attorney General did not himself get to see the President until the Saturday of the blow up. It was by then too late to put the pieces back together.

Haig fully immersed himself in the President's Watergate counterattack at a crowded press conference in the West Basement on Tuesday, Oct. 23, a session with strongly confrontational overtones between press and presidential spokesmen Haig and attorney Charles Alan Wright.

The session was punctuated by a backdrop of derisive horn-honking from Pennsylvania Avenue prompted by anti-Nixon demonstrators urging motorists to "Honk for Impeachment."

Haig was not only clearly

in command but in the forward bunker facing into enemy fire.

When one reporter asked if it were he who ordered the FBI to occupy the premises of the Watergate special prosecutor the night Cox was fired, Haig stepped forward and thrust his face out at them. For a second the urbane bureaucrat's mask gave way to the professional soldier's tight, combative smile.

"Guilty" Gen. Haig barked, almost joyously.

Looking back this weekend at that tense and turbulent meeting with the press, Haig acknowledged that it deepened his own personal involvement in the Watergate quagmire.

"I was fully aware of the risks when I went into the press room that afternoon. But I had to brief them. There was no one else to do it."

There were, in fact, others. There were White House lawyers Fred Buzhardt and Leonard Garment who were fully versed on the details and legal booby traps surrounding the issues of Cox and the tapes. Why Haig?

A possible answer to that question is that Haig had that one increasingly rare attribute in the scandal-ridden White House atmosphere—deniability.

For one thing, he had until then stayed clear of Watergate, as far as was publicly known. And he had also been professionally bred under the West Point Code. "A cadet does not lie, cheat or steal . . ."

(Actually, Haig sat in on one of the early meetings of the White House "plumbers" in the late summer of 1971. At issue was who would give lie detector tests—the FBI or CIA—to administration officials to determine the source of a major news leak. The meeting, according to a senior participant, was chaired by the plumbers' former chief, Egil Krogh. Also present was Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt.)

During the week of the "firestorm," Haig was further cemented into the White House strategy when he was told to direct Richardson and then Ruckelshaus to carry out the presidential mandate to fire Cox.

Haig now claims that his now-famous injunction to Ruckelshaus—"Your commander in chief has given you an order"—has been

quoted out of context in a way that portrays him as a mindless martinet.

"I've been around this town," Haig protests. "I'm not a virgin. I've never used that kind of language."

It is Ruckelshaus' recollection, however, that he did. And there are other recollections that go back 3½ years to the Situation Room of the White House.

It was the eve of the U.S. military incursion into Cambodia. One of Henry Kissinger's top National Security Council aides, William Watts, had just told Kissinger he disapproved of the Cambodian operation and was prepared to resign.

When Haig learned of Watts' declaration to Kis-

singer he angrily confronted his colleague in the Situation Room, witnesses of the episode remember. They recall his flaring at Watts: "You have an order from your commander-in-chief.

Watts, a former political aide to Nelson A. Rockefeller, shot back: "Oh yes I can—and I have."

Haig, the professional soldier of 27 years and the consummate national security bureaucrat, took another giant step toward entanglement in Watergate's political morass when he appeared jointly with Mr. Nixon in closed sessions with Republican lawmakers. It was the beginning of what the White House has called "Operation Candor."

access to the courts in gathering presidential evidence. He also denied statements laid to Haig that he originally acquiesced in the firing of Cox.

The issue of who was telling the truth is more than a frivolity. There is now talk on Capitol Hill of taking sworn testimony from both sides on just what happened within the administration the week of the Saturday Night Massacre.

"This dispute is being blown up by some people," Haig insists. "Not by Elliot certainly but by other people. Elliot and I have great mutual respect and confidence—I certainly have for him. We lived through a lot together—the Agnew thing."

Sitting in the evening quiet of his White House office down the hall from the President last weekend, Haig spoke in tones of stoic foreboding about the future.

He had been looking forward to 12 more years of military service at the time he accepted the job of chief of staff to the President. He realized he was jeopardizing a military career. At the same time, he had won his four stars during the period of White House service, and had been jumped over scores of more senior officers.

"One of my closest friends in government called me up after I had been offered this appointment and said, 'Al, don't do it. You're going to

Haig as well as the President, according to senatorial participants in those sessions, strongly implied that Elliot Richardson had lied about his role in the Cox affair.

He went so far, according to some senatorial witnesses, as to suggest that Richardson reversed himself at the last minute on the issue of Cox's dismissal as a political ploy aimed at winning the Massachusetts governorship.

In the current contretemps between Richardson and the President over the firing of Cox, public credibility is an important value.

Richardson's version was that he consistently opposed any attempt to limit Cox's

be ground up," he recalled. It remains to be seen whether the advice was right.

Haig is now a 48-year-old retired general who ranks first in the official presidential family. But the future is colored in tones of somber ambiguity. Watergate has been a voracious destroyer of men and reputations.

"I'm not interested in politics—but I might well be interested in continued public service. It's possible I could emerge from this so scarred that this would no longer be an option.

"At this stage, I don't look further than today. Public service has become a risky business," Gen. Haig now realizes.