

A Loyalist's Departure

General Alexander Haig has paid his dues to the United States. Several times.

From West Point to Korea, from the Pentagon to Viet Nam, he answered every call to duty. Then Richard Nixon called him one day when Haig, at the time a four-star general and Army vice chief of staff, was visiting Fort Benning. Haldeman and Ehrlichman, about to be thrown out of the White House, wanted Haig to come take charge of the staff. "I really don't think I'm the man," he said. "You don't want a military man in that job."

The loyalty ethic is strong with Haig. He went. But not blindly. "You won't come out alive," a friend told him. Haig had been through the Cuban missile crisis, made 13 trips to Viet Nam. "I don't think professional public servants have the luxury to play it safe in time of national crisis," he said.

Haig sat last week in the luxurious office that Haldeman had crafted so carefully for himself. Almost by the hour there were new accusations hurled at him—he had got Nixon his pardon, he had subverted the Ford transition with his secrecy and obsession to protect the Nixon record. He was being blamed for more than he had ever done. But he has never admitted just how much he did do. "I may write it some day when I'm 60," he mused (he is now 49). He saw the destruction of a President at closer range than anyone else.

"Nothing on the battlefield was as tough as this," Haig said. "Nor did I ever see any more human tragedy."

Never in our history has a White House aide been at the vortex of such pressure, been the man to orchestrate so many traumatic events, been torn by so many personal emotions, doubts, loyalties. How could he have continued to believe in Nixon? It is no simple matter to arrange your sense of duty when you see it as Haig did. "It involves the country and the American people," is all he will say now. "That's what it was all about." He deserves to be listened to.

Was he acting President in those last Nixon months? "I had to do things I would not have done under ordinary circumstances," he replied. "You cannot avoid responsibility." Was there ever a time that Nixon was irrational, unable to act? "If there were, I wouldn't tell anybody," he said.

When he began his last White House tour of duty, he found almost total paralysis in the wake of the Haldeman-Ehrlichman firing. He got the machinery going again. He found that Nixon had no Watergate counsel. Haig recruited Fred Buzhardt from the Pentagon and urged Nixon to lay out all of the Watergate case. When Nixon made his May 22 statement, Haig thought that was the whole story. How could he have continued to believe as one by one Nixon's defenses were shown to be false, incomplete? That is the part that Haig cannot explain away. Maybe it was the fighter in him, responding to his commander no matter what. The transcripts

show that he helped Nixon continue his deception.

Yet, six months before the end, Haig and Kissinger saw an anguished impeachment trial, bare survival for Nixon. And even that was the thinnest of hunches. Did Haig begin to ease the way for a Nixon resignation then? Probably.

Haig knew that Watergate was taking a terrible physical toll of Nixon. The viral pneumonia was the first signal. Yet Nixon could come back to his peak. Said Haig: "The President performed brilliantly in the Middle East and Russia."

When Haig learned of the last transcript, he knew Nixon was finished. He believes Nixon knew it too. Some others in the White House did not. Haig moved through the murk. The question that concerned him most was whether the country was ready for the events ahead, and Haig moved skillfully to get the tapes out and bring the country abreast of them.

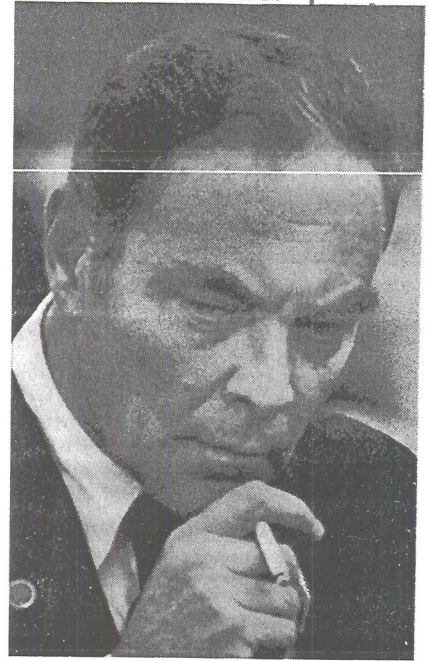
Haig retains admiration for Nixon in that dark hour. "There was every idea imaginable around," he declared, "including the idea that Nixon should pardon himself and everybody else." There were only two options seriously considered. The first was to resign unconditionally, as he did, or see it through and let the system work to the end. He knew the outcome. He felt an obligation to the country."

Haig never worried about Nixon or anybody in the White House turning to the military to preserve his power. "The danger was from outside forces—that from so much frustration somebody would take events into his hands and use extraconstitutional means or some distortion of the 25th Amendment. The country was very fortunate in the outcome. I am at peace with myself. The system works. We have seen a total transfer of power in a way that brings us nothing but hope for the future."

Haig was for the Nixon pardon. But he was not responsible for Ford's granting it, he insisted. "Had I been asked to be an advocate, I would have been. I was never asked."

Haig is wiser now than when he came to the White House 17 months ago. He still is a fighter. He goes to the NATO command with relish, despite criticism. And even with some humor. Henry Kissinger came into Haig's office the other day, when the morning papers were filled with accusations against Haig. "The trouble with Haig," said Kissinger, "is that he is always improving his image." The two friends exploded with laughter.

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ALEXANDER HAIG