

Trying to Ensure an Epitaph

Some day history may rank them as special heroes, emerging out of a shadowy world of anguish that now we can only begin to comprehend. Alexander Haig, the President's chief of staff, who, with deep care and sensitivity, midwifed the political death of Richard Nixon. James St. Clair, reviled by many when he went before the Supreme Court and the Congress, who finally recognized there was no defense of the President and told him so. Henry Kissinger, who came into Nixon's orbit of power as the lone outsider, but who in the end was comforter, friend and the man to whom Nixon entrusted his one hope—to be remembered as a man of peace.

Perhaps no story like this has ever been written. Kings have gone. Dictators have been forced out. But there has never been a man of such power, a man of such renown, a man elected by 47 million people, who gave it all away.

It was Wednesday, July 31, when Haig learned of the evidence that would end Nixon's career. He hurried through the humid streets of Washington to Kissinger's State Department office. He told Kissinger what had been found. It was a curious time for these two old friends who had been through so much together. It was a time of relief, surely. They had talked many times before, and vaguely in the distance they had seen the end approaching, even without the new tapes. Now it was real, and rushing in on them.

They had no choice. Their loyalty, and the loyalty of the others who stood around Nixon, had to be lifted beyond that one personality. It had to be fixed on the office of the President, on the United States of America. Nixon somehow had to be shepherded through the ordeal so that he understood and would not ravage himself even more in futile resistance.

Kissinger kept in touch with James Schlesinger, Secretary of Defense, and William Simon, Secretary of the Treasury, the two other most powerful and visible Cabinet members. Their understanding was that the Cabinet must be calmed, must be kept in touch with reality. A careless speech or comment on fighting it out might falsely mislead Nixon about the inevitability of resignation, might freeze him into a position that would grow even more tragic. In Haig's frantic orchestration were the Republican Congressmen and the Republican Senators, men whose voices would mean something in bringing the light to Nixon.

Haig, St. Clair and their few allies walked on eggs through the last weekend at Camp David, responding instead of telling, implying more than explaining. With his family gathered around him, all of whom wanted to fight it out, Nixon still did not believe that beyond the White House cocoon the world had turned so hard against him.

On his yacht, cruising the Potomac Monday night, he was the tough field marshal, devising some grand strategy that would roll it all back in one brilliant stroke so that he could stand vindicated in some distant place and time. He put it bluntly the next day at the Cabinet meeting. He would not resign. There were no protests. But for the first time there were no spontaneous expressions of joy about fighting the good battle. The absence of cheers for his defiance may have helped make things come more clearly into focus for Richard Nixon.

He asked Kissinger to see him after the Cabinet meeting. History will tell the story some day. We can only assume it was then that the man who had carried the faltering Nixon credibility so far by his own genius and honor said, face to face, that he felt that for everybody's good, Nixon should resign.

Then the legacy of peace suddenly became uppermost in Nixon's mind, and in the minds of all these men. Haig, Kissinger and the others wanted to save that much for Nixon. If there was to be an epitaph, Nixon wanted it thus. Kissinger emerged to tell the world that American foreign policy stood

unchanged. It would go on, just as America was going on.

On Tuesday evening Nixon was coming to grips with hard reality. He called Kissinger five times on the phone. He talked about his position: what would happen in the world, the country, if he stayed, if he went. He was a man reaching for any support, yet knowing there was none, or at least beginning to perceive it. He was a man trying to fashion something graceful from the terrible debris that, as in a Greek tragedy, he had created.

Some place there must be a log of the number of times Nixon met with Haig and Kissinger, but they could not keep track. By Wednesday night Nixon's mind was fixed. He would go. He told his family.

Kissinger was asked to the mansion late Wednesday after the President had had his dinner. Nixon wanted to talk one last time as President, one last time as they used to talk when they so joyfully contemplated the world and saw their great plans succeeding.

Nixon told Kissinger that he would resign the next day. Nixon talked on; he talked about many things. He talked about his family and about his Quakerism, and about peace and how deeply he believed in it. He talked about prayer and some will beyond his. He wanted to know if he would be remembered for bringing world peace in his years as President. Henry Kissinger told him that he would be.

There are few historic moments that could exceed this in intensity and pain and sorrow. The most powerful man in the world was giving up his power, which he had devoted his life to achieving. The man in whom he had placed the most trust in the use of that power was listening, and somehow trying to make it right or at best bearable.

What thoughts must go through those minds? Again, we can only begin to imagine. But surely Kissinger sensed the irony of it all. Richard Nixon, the immensely complex figure in front of him, had done all the things that eventually brought him down out of his general aspirations for good. If Nixon had only hated totally, it might have been easier. But he was not that simple. He craved the adoration of the press and the Eastern liberals even as he assaulted them. He coveted the public trust as he withdrew from people. He espoused the ideals of a democratic society even as he violated them.

It was after midnight when they parted. Kissinger went back to his office in the West Wing of the White House. The phone rang. Nixon wanted to talk some more, a kind of last, thin reach for a life that was ebbing. Then, some time between midnight and 1 a.m. as far as anyone knows, Richard Nixon cut himself off from the outside world and returned to his family to wait for the daylight.

NIXON MEETING WITH KISSINGER

