

By Lou Cannon
and Carroll Kilpatrick
Washington Post Staff Writers

A report that White House chief of staff Alexander M. Haig Jr. played a key roll in President Ford's decision to pardon former President Nixon was quickly and strongly denied yesterday.

Presidential spokesman John W. Hushen and Haig denied the reports, carried in yesterday's New York Times under a San Clemente, Calif., dateline and widely distributed elsewhere.

Haig called the published report "totally untrue."

"It's not really a disservice to me to suggest that I was the operative force," Haig said, "but it's a terrible disservice to President Ford to suppose that he could be manipulated by something like this."

Haig also denied that he had been responsible for keeping news of the planned pardon from J. F. terHorst, who resigned as Mr. Ford's press secretary in protest

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against the pardon, as The Times story alleged.

The Times said that Haig, after being advised of the "alarming state" of the former President's health, persuaded Mr. Ford to reverse an earlier position and grant a full pardon.

Quoting "a longtime friend of Mr. Nixon" and a former staff member "in daily touch with affairs inside the Nixons' heavily guarded Casa Pacifica estate," the story said Haig received reports on Mr. Nixon's health from both his daughters, from former White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler and from Nixon intimates Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo and Robert H. Abplanalp.

Despite the Haig and Hushen denials, debate over the pardon issue, which Mr. Ford sought to end at his news conference Monday evening, persisted.

Hushen told reporters he checked The Times story with "every source" — the President, Haig, and Watergate Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski — "and I cannot find any truth in that at all."

The story claimed that Haig and Jaworski met before Haig presented the proposal to the President for "an immediate 'humanitarian' pardon to the President on Aug. 29."

Haig made these points in an interview:

"Prior to the pardon, I never talked to any member of the Nixon family or anyone else about his health, either directly or indirectly, or made any such report to President Ford.

"I have not been in contact with Mr. Rebozo or with Mr. Abplanalp in the post-resignation period. I never had any meeting with Jaworski — and I called him this morning because I was so outraged by the story."

Haig acknowledged that he had "a lot of power at the White House" and he said there was a fear by persons he would not name that "I would stay on, even though I said repeatedly that I wanted to leave after the transition."

"I believe what President Ford said at his press conference about the reasons he granted the pardon," Haig added. "It wasn't my doing." But he said he thought "the judgment of history will show that it was a wise decision."

"No one was more sensitive than I to the reasons for not becoming involved in this," Haig went on. "I couldn't have been a creditable advocate for a pardon anyway."

Hushen denied that Haig had met with Jaworski, and Jaworski made a similar comment.

Haig, who leaves this week after serving 16 months as White House staff chief to become commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and of American forces in Europe, has not talked to Rebozo and Abplanalp for four months and has not talked to Julie Eisenhower and Tricia Cox, or their husbands, since Mr. Nixon resigned, Hushen said.

The spokesman also said that Haig "never discussed the former President's health or the question of pardon with any members of the Nixon family."

Haig has had conversations with Mr. Nixon and with Ziegler, Hushen said.

The President authorized Hushen to quote him as follows: "Al Haig never discussed with me the mental or physical condition of former President Nixon prior to my decision to grant the pardon."

Hushen replied "no" when asked if Haig urged Mr. Ford to pardon the former President, adding: "His role

was described as neutral. He did not lobby for it."

One White House aide said yesterday that Haig in fact endeavored to remove himself from discussions of the pardon issue.

"Knowing the President as I do," the aide said, "I don't believe Nixon's health was the major consideration in the President's mind."

The aide also maintained that Haig "cannot manage the President's mind. He's (the President) tougher than that."

Haig's prospective departure from the White House has focused attention on the behind-the-scenes struggle that has been going on even since Mr. Nixon resigned.

Basically, the Ford men complain that Haig, assisted by a handful of entrenched Nixon holdovers, has controlled the flow of information and access to the new President. This charge was made directly last week in a television interview by terHorst.

The Nixon holdovers tend to see themselves as people who have worked selflessly for the new President while Ford aides discredited them by leaking stories that they were still loyal to Mr. Nixon. From the point of view of the Nixon men, many of the Ford aides have been distinguished chiefly by inexperience and by a desire to blame Nixon holdovers for their own blunders.

"If you have a set of decisions that someone isn't going to be comfortable with, it's always easy to blame them on someone else," Haig said.

While Haig has been the chief villain to the Ford men, most of the resentment of the Nixon men has been directed at Robert T. Hartmann, an ex-newspaperman whom Mr. Ford brought in as a top counselor, and Philip W. Buchen, the President's attorney.