

Recycling General Haig

In the face of considerable opposition in this country and abroad, President Ford has proceeded with the appointment of Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe as well as commander of United States Forces in Europe.

The most serious objection to General Haig in this new role is not that he has never held a major Army field command, nor that he was catapulted over 240 general officers when President Nixon abruptly raised him to four-star rank and named him vice chief of staff of the Army in 1972, nor that he has had little experience of dealing with America's allies in Europe. Indeed, even his critics concede that General Haig is a man of high intelligence and outstanding administrative talents.

What raises such serious questions about the appointment is the fact that it will further blur the vital dividing line between political and military authority. General Haig once again dons his uniform and returns to active duty, only seventeen months after making the deliberate decision to resign his commission and retire from the Army in order to serve in the White House in a position that incredibly placed him in the center of President Nixon's political struggle for survival.

During those months, as the Watergate case against the President was moving to its inexorable conclusion, General Haig became more and more Mr. Nixon's protector and defender and, on occasion, his hatchet man as well. His leading part in the so-called Saturday night massacre last October that brought the abrupt departures from office of the Attorney General, his deputy and the special Watergate prosecutor will not soon be forgotten.

General Haig unquestionably played a useful role in persuading Mr. Nixon to resign last month and in easing the transition to President Ford's Administration. Yet, reports persist—despite his direct denials—that he was a major influence in bringing Mr. Ford to the premature unconditional pardon of Mr. Nixon.

The issue, however, is not General Haig's role or position on any particular occasion or issue; the crucial point is the wisdom of a policy that permits him now to go back on his decision of June, 1973, to leave the military—to wear Army stars again and act as though this "civilian" interlude had meant no change whatsoever.

In a world full of examples of the folly of military ascendancy over civilian authority and in a country presumably dedicated to the principle of civilian control over men in uniform, the resurrection of the military career of Alexander Haig is a blunder President Ford should have been alerted by his advisers to avoid.