

# The Haig Appointment

The appointment of General Alexander M. Haig Jr. to be NATO's Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR) is offensive on two counts. The first concerns the appointment itself. The second concerns what it reveals about Washington's approach to high-level diplomatic appointments. If the full implications of the Haig appointment can be appreciated, especially at this time of intensive awareness of governmental deficiencies, they may serve as the catalyst to produce the long-needed reform in the way we go about this aspect of our international affairs.

The quality of the previous SAC-EURs was notable — Eisenhower, Ridgeway, Grunther, Norstad, Lemnitzer, Goodpaster—and only emphasizes Haig's weakness: lack of command experience, innocence of Alliance affairs, the taint of Watergate. It is one more episode in the dreary history of Americans being assigned abroad for every reason but relevant knowledge or experience. Without reservation we send an owner of parking lots to The Ha-

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*The writer served as a deputy assistant secretary of State and U.S. Ambassador to the European Communities.*

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gue, a publisher of "TV Guide" to London. This complaint should not be construed as a plea for ambassadorial positions to be the exclusive preserve of the Foreign Service. Left to its own devices the career service is entirely capable of naming incompetents who are the match of those from private life. And the Foreign Service would be hard-pressed to equal men of the quality of David Bruce or Edwin Reischauer.

We are accustomed to the political use of comfortable ambassadorial assignments for purposes of canceling a debt or resolving an awkward party problem. The President and the Republican leaders are repaying an obligation to Haig. He had sensitively gone out of his way to advise and assist Ford as Vice President, a decency to be rewarded. The conservative Republican leaders felt indebted to Haig for his role in Nixon's resignation. Hence, a place for him had to be found. Certainly the military were not about to accept back gracefully the 1969 colonel turned instant four-star general (Rtd.). We have had a spate of these cases: the fight against inflation meant that Rush had to be eased out of town and thus to Paris; Bush, of all things, to Peking; and, where political obligations are obscure, Flanigan, to aid the Spanish transition.

An essential adjunct to this peculiar, self-serving practice is American indifference to foreign sensibilities or foreigners' resentment of the individuals imposed upon them. The fact that our allies have been discreet should not be interpreted as contentment with the Haig nomination. For years Americans and Europeans devoted to NATO affairs have sought to make SACEUR an "Alliance" commander, not merely an American commander in Europe to take charge of European mercenaries in time of military crisis. The Greek-Turkish confrontation and the pressure to reduce American troops abroad make the Alliance connotation more urgent. In justification the administration responds, "But the Europeans did not protest; they welcomed the Haig

appointment." For good reason. Our allies have discovered that, if frustrated in such matters, Washington can be exceedingly nasty. Overwhelming European reservations to Haig were a piece of cake. The trick was first to line up the Germans. They have the greatest stake in NATO—geographic vulnerability, plus the fact that they make the principal contribution of men and money and are most threatened by the prospect of American troop withdrawal. Bonn's acquiescence collapsed any chance of organized European resistance to Haig. Grudging, unanimous agreement was achieved, but at a price. The episode adds credibility to those Europeans who see in the Alliance not evidence of an Atlantic part-

nership, but rather of an American abuse of power.

One should be able to assume that the State Department, in exercising its responsibilities for foreign relations, with respect to senior appointments overseas, would insist on competent candidates and, conversely, would protest unqualified nominees where foreign displeasure could be anticipated. In fact, Kissinger has yet to spend any of his fund of political capital to block bad appointments. As he places no stock in the institutions of foreign affairs or, specifically, in the

utility of overseas missions, he would see no reason for concern over European unease at the Haig appointment. If the Secretary of State cares little about the foreign reaction, no one can expect the White House to take seriously adverse Allied opinion.

I have lost the capacity for surprise, if not for embarrassment, at the callousness with which the government treats its own people. Without a word General Goodpaster is thrown from the end of the sleigh. Years of distinguished public service, many of them as aide to Eisenhower, in which he earned the admiration of the allies and the Congress stimulated only profane White House acknowledgment of our national debt to this extraordinary officer. This all too typical, graceless neglect says unpleasant things to foreigners about the American government's values.

Vietnam, Cambodia and now Chile have provoked congressional huffing and puffing about Executive Branch license in foreign affairs. Yet in the area of presidential appointment, where the Senate's collateral, constitutional prerogatives, are explicit, to look for content in the exercise of "advice and consent" is like waiting for Godot. Legislative posturing and condemnation of Executive excesses are easier than perusing efforts to excuse responsibility. The Haig appointment, as several senators have pointed out, obliges the Congress to examine critical questions: the separation of the military from civilian activity, the matter of qualifications, the question of whether Haig would advance American interests abroad. But then, senatorial laxity should come as no surprise when one recalls the docile acceptance of Firestone for Belgium, for example, or Farkas for Luxembourg.

The American practice regarding diplomatic assignment is bizarre and in stark contrast with the procedure of both ally and foreign adversary. Others choose their envoys from professional diplomatic ranks, only oc-

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asionally bending this practice to name an ex-minister or distinguished parliamentarian. If we are disinclined to take these overseas missions seriously, then why accept the expense as well as the embarrassment to other countries which our practice engenders?

If the Foreign Relations Committee were interested in fulfilling the Senate's constitutional responsibilities, content could be put into those words "advice and consent." With a procedure derived from the American Bar Association's informal appraisal of proposed nominations to the judiciary, the Committee could establish a senior, nonpartisan panel of private experts to review presidential nominations prior to consideration by the Committee. The panel would be expected to advise the Committee whether the candidates met minimum qualifications for confirmation. The first act of such a panel could be to develop in cooperation with the committee the criterion to be used in judging the nominations. The mere establishment of such a procedure would have an ennobling effect on both the Senate and the President, constraining the President from the habit of employing diplomacy as the easy way of solving irksome political personnel problems.