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Haig's Uphill Fight

'Political' General Wins Praise

By Michael Getler

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MONS, Belgium—Eighteen months after leaving a shell-shocked White House for the relative quiet of NATO headquarters, Gen. Alexander M. Haig has managed to erase much of the controversy that surrounded his appointment as supreme allied commander in Europe.

When he arrived at NATO's military headquarters here December 15, 1974, Haig told reporters he wanted "to be judged on my performance, not on how I got here" a reference to his five years as White House deputy to Henry A. Kissinger, Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

Most of the NATO hierarchy was glad to have him. He was bright, attractive and obviously well-connected.

Yet there were others who feared that Haig was too much the political-general and not enough the battlefield commander for the prized NATO job.

Slowly but steadily, the urbane 52-year-old general who played such a crucial role as White House chief of staff in the final months of the Nixon administration appears to have overcome most of the suspicions.



ALEXANDER HAIG

... articulate, competent

Haig has emerged as one of the most articulate spokesmen NATO has ever had spinning out a hardline, anti-Marxist line that has more intellectual grace than NATO's traditional "The Russians are coming" message.

While the alliance is in tatters politically, he has tried, with some success, to

See HAIG, A14, Col. 1

HAIG, From A1

breathe more life into it militarily.

Haig has made some important changes in NATO strategy with respect to repositioning troops and in getting outnumbered allied forces to coordinate their troops, weapons and training better. The changes have earned high marks from military planners.

Ironically, some of the growing respect for the general within European leadership ranks in recent months has also come from an unexpected source—the new book written by the two Washington Post reporters whose work eventually led to the downfall of Haig's boss—Richard Nixon.

Haig emerges as one of the heroes of "The Final Days" by Robert Woodward and Carl Bernstein portrayed as tireless, unflappable and eventually as the skillful stage-manager of the resignation of a battered president.

Last month, an article in West Germany's respected Frankfurter Allgemeine newspaper called attention to the Haig portrait "as of special significance for Europeans."

The column described Haig as: "... a mixture of a brilliant modern general staff officer and a far-sighted Machiavelli, a combination of dignity and shrewdness ... a living computer who, in the final days of the Nixon administration, may have established for himself the basis for a political career that may lead to his moving into the White House someday."

The column embarrassed NATO headquarters here, but it nevertheless reflects the phenomenon of Haig's unprecedented background continuing to thrust him into the political spotlight. It also makes him the subject of guessing games among top allied commanders.

"This is especially so now because the view, whether accurate or not, is widespread that President Ford is somehow in Haig's debt, in part for his selection as Vice President and for the skill with which Haig handled the transition of administrations.

Thus, Haig's military fu-

ture—whether he stays as NATO chief or perhaps becomes chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington—is seen by some observers as tied to Mr. Ford's election success.

Some top military men speculate that the current chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Air Force Gen. George Brown, might be extended in that job for a year, with Haig moving in in 1977.

Haig does not speculate about his military future or some other role.

"I see myself continuing where I am as long as I can make a constructive contribution. I haven't thought beyond that very seriously at all," he said in an interview here.

"I don't see myself as any unique character," he adds. "I've been in a position that's been unique by happenstance. I'm a trained soldier, public servant, and that's the limit of my aspirations."

Within Haig's military headquarters here, and in NATO's alliance headquarters in nearby Brussels, there are new strategic currents stirring these days—long-range concerns about the Soviets using their military power in some less-than-all-out way to divert Communist bloc attention from economic and political problems, and more immediately, concerns over Cuban and Soviet activities in Africa, outside of NATO's established geographical charter.

There have been hints that NATO is thinking about how it can expand its influence below the Tropic of Cancer that runs through northern Africa, either as an alliance or through other arrangements.

Potentially it is one of the most important new directions of allied strategy. But it is another of the things that Haig will not discuss in his politically sensitive effort not to offend any individual NATO governments. "I'm only one-fifteenth American in this job," he says.

Haig talks easily of his concerns about Soviet military strength, in particular the addition over the last few years of roughly 130,000 men to Soviet garrisons already in Eastern Europe.

Perhaps the newest ele-

ment of Haig's public assessment, however, is that things may be improving for the allies.

When he first came here, Haig says his reaction to the West's position "initially was one of concern. More recently, I have been more encouraged because I have seen a growing awareness in all capitals about the nature of the problem. I don't want to overdraw this because it doesn't mean we don't have a plethora of meaty difficulties to deal with.

"But if you look at the Mediterranean," the general goes on, "we have had an evolution in Portugal. It is far from out of the woods and very difficult still. But there have been recent elections and manifestations of a moderate, pluralistic outcome.

"There is an evolution in Spain from which we have some reason to draw encouragement that it will be greater in the direction of moderation, greater integration in European affairs—economic and security.

"We have the exception of Italy, which is perhaps at the peak of its crisis.

"In Greece and Turkey we have been wrestling with these insoluble problems, which I believe were aggravated by American policies, but which now provide some hope of normalization of the alliance relationships.

"Now all this is highly dynamic and dangerous," he continues, "but nonetheless you look at that northern tier of the Mediterranean and it's not a question of being all black—not by a long shot.

"In recent months, there has also been a growing awareness in the Scandinavian countries—Denmark and Norway—of the need to maintain their guard.

"Britain is a special problem because of their severe economic bind, but there you still see evenhandedness in austerity not all falling on defense, so that is encouraging.

"In the U.S., you see the emergence of the highest defense budget in history.

"So I would say there is this awareness of the need to maintain a compensatory military capability to that of the Soviet Union and reverse what has been a very



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Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. reviewing troops in West Germany as NATO chief.

consistent downward trend in relative capability.

"The simple facts are," Haig adds "that if you look at the Atlantic Alliance, plus Japan, you have twice the industrial base and one-and-a-half times the manpower as the Soviet bloc. We are therefore groping with a problem of will and establishing priorities and this is a do-able task."

In trying to win friends and influence people in NATO soon after he got here, Haig appeared to adopt the same strategy he used in the White House: Stay in the background, at least for a while.

The general brought some controversial baggage with him. It was conceded by his critics that he could not turn down President Nixon's request in mid-1973 to have him serve as his civilian chief of staff and give up, temporarily, his three-star job as vice chief of the army. It was also acknowledged in the army that he had probably done a critical job in keeping the White House together, although it was not widely known then.

Nevertheless, there were those who felt that the only reason he got the NATO job was through political clout and that any reminder at all of the Watergate era was inappropriate for NATO. Others felt that Haig's career pattern would set a bad ex-

ample for young officers—choosing key desk jobs instead of battlefield commands—and some resented handing over the West's most powerful combined army to a general who had commanded nothing higher than a brigade in Vietnam for a brief period in 1967.

Still others resented his meteoric rise from colonel to four-star general in four years and his being skipped over 240 senior generals for the army vice chief's job.

It was clear at the outset here that had some enemies in the ranks. Embarrassing stories about his dog and some vodka being shipped at government expense were leaked to the press.

Haig himself caused some political problems early in 1975 with the West Germans, who are among his most solid supporters, by announcing in a newspaper interview his intention to station for the first time a U.S. Army brigade in northern Germany. The announcement was made without telling the Germans it was coming. It smacked of American insensitivity and clearly ruffled the feathers of West German Defense Minister George Leber. Unannounced Haig visits to German military exercises also annoyed Leber and his commanders.

Then Defense Secretary James R. Schlesinger cautioned Haig to be careful of

such political sensitivities during a swing through Europe.

When Schlesinger was fired in November 1975 by Mr. Ford, some officers suggested that the general, who flew to Washington twice last fall to see Mr. Ford, might have had a hand in it, perhaps so that Haig could take over as the preeminent alliance spokesman. Haig is known to deny that vehemently.

Other officers point out that last year there were some 18 general officers reassigned in the European commands, a very large number that included the handful who were senior in rank, though not authority, to Haig. The general's aides explain that this was not a purge but was linked to the same thing that happened throughout the military in 1975, when new retirement pension rules went into effect.

The controversies have clearly faded, however, and by virtually all accounts the general is viewed as a major plus for NATO.

"He is remarkable. We are very much for him" says a ranking German official.

"He is brutally efficient," says a Canadian. "When he came he kept his head down for a while. But he is uncontestedly in charge now. No one would dare challenge him."