

Questioning Haig's Role

Coming in the wake of the bungled pardon, the nomination of Gen. Alexander Haig, the White House Chief of Staff to be commander of NATO poses serious problems. For circumstantial evidence connects General Haig with a mountain of dirty work—including a doctored White House memo served up to the congressional impeachment inquiry.

But the President—and this is a principal lesson of the pardon—is not in a good position to deal with the Nixonite Old Guard. So it is essential that General Haig be subjected to a thorough going congressional scrutiny before being allowed to resume military duties.

General Haig's over-all difficulty is best expressed by General Haig himself. According to the Wall Street Journal, he told an interviewer that, "It's only a soldier who can respect and admire a politician." Politics, he said, is "a field where a man lays everything on the line to win or lose . . . When one doesn't win, the results are fatal."

It is hard to think of a more wrong-headed notion. The quintessential genius of American democracy, the basic premise of representative government, is that it is not fatal to lose. Those who go down don't get wiped out. On the contrary, they live to fight—and even win—another day. That's what elections are about.

But General Haig, for all the half-baked talk about being a soldier-statesman, doesn't understand that. He is a bureaucratic general, a highly effective pusher of buttons on behalf of his boss. If the boss plays a clean

game, then Haig will play clean. But if the boss plays a dirty game, Haig will play dirty.

It is not exactly a secret that the Nixon White House played an exceptionally dirty game. Nor that General Haig played the game with zest and skill in a way which brought him rapid promotion. Nor that he was involved in a suspicious number of smelly transactions.

As deputy to Henry Kissinger at the National Security Council, he managed the wiretap program. As White House chief of staff, in 1973 and 1974, he presided over the Watergate cover-up. That is how he happened to be in a position—a totally inappropriate position for a military man—to make the final arrangements for Mr. Nixon's resignation.

But while the broad outlines of Haig's operations are known, the details are obscure and full of question marks. What exactly was Haig's role in the Saturday night massacre of the Watergate special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, in the fall of 1973? Didn't Haig think something was fishy when Lt. General Robert Pursely, a distinguished officer serving as military aide to Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, was subjected to wiretapping? What was Haig's role in the "Pentagon Spy Ring" and the White House "plumbers"? How about the 18½ minutes missing from the most critical White House tape?

Then there is the strange episode of the doctored Butterfield memo. When wiretaps picked up the information that Clark Clifford, a leading Democratic adviser, was preparing an

article critical of President Nixon's Vietnam policy in 1970, Jeb Magruder of the White House staff was detailed to prepare a response. He asked Alexander Butterfield, the former Nixon aide who later revealed the existence of the White House tapes, for advice. Butterfield spoke of organizing a "counter-attack," and said, in a memorandum to Magruder, "Al Haig can get you squared away on at least a preliminary scheme."

But when the Magruder memo was turned over by the White House to the Congress, it had been badly doctored. The sentence about Haig setting up a "preliminary scheme" was missing. Haig was White House chief of staff at the time of the doctoring, which protected him. Did he know about it? If not, how come? Wasn't he on the distribution list for the original memo?

The Ford White House staff cannot possibly explore such questions. If nothing else, as the pardon blunder indicates, Mr. Ford and his staff are too decent to deal effectively with the Nixon gang. But the Senate, through rigorous confirmation hearings, could handle the Haig problem.

Confirmation hearings would settle the doubts many entertain. They would allow Haig to talk to the truly vital question of whether it is appropriate for a military man to take on the broad political responsibilities he assumed for Mr. Nixon. And they would ease the suspicion generated by the pardon, that the President is lavishly rewarding those who figured in the Nixon resignation, no matter what else they may have done.