

Personnel Problems for

President Ford's strong inclination to retain Gen. Alexander Haig as White House chief of staff is coming under equally strong criticism, expressed so far only privately, from powerful political forces in both parties.

These critics argue that, for all his competence, Haig is too much the symbol of the last nightmarish year of the Nixon presidency. Accordingly, the deepening sense that Haig will continue running the White House staff indefinitely alarms Republican politicians. "For Al's sake and for Ford's sake, I hope not," says one ex-Nixon assistant.

What to do about Haig, moreover, is the intensification of a broader dilemma: in seeking continuity, is the new President losing his chance for a new spirit of revival in Washington?

The Haig dilemma is acutely painful. Having developed a genuine intimacy with Al Haig ("very comfortable," says one insider) in recent months, the President obviously feels Haig is his answer to two paramount problems:

First, keeping Haig voids the problem of filling a most demanding staff job. Certainly, there is no replacement in sight.

Only slightly less important, Mr. Ford thinks Haig's retention would advertise "stability and continuity" between the Nixon and Ford administrations.

But powerful forces in both parties, particularly on Capitol Hill but by no means limited there, feel that Haig's nearly 15 months as Mr. Nixon's point-man makes him expendable. They believe he should go quickly—long before the Nov. 5 election.

Fairly or not, senior members of Congress contend that, however guiltless Haig is in strictly Watergate terms, he embodies Richard Nixon's tendency toward downgrading Congress and belittling conventional politics.

More to the point, say these politicians, Haig was forcibly immersed in intimate details of Nixon's long battle for survival after he became White House chief of staff. This happened despite Nixon's original promise to Haig that Watergate would be out of his province.

What deeply worries the Haig-must-go camp is that his fingerprints may yet be found on some vagrant Oval Of-

fice tape or document, not in any legally incriminating way but in a way to embarrass Jerry Ford. They feel the chance is not worth taking.

Haig is the clearest symbol of Mr. Ford's White House staff problem. When the President entered the Roosevelt Room moments after taking his oath of office last Friday, he looked perplexed as a voice introduced "the President of the United States." His first words were that, while a new President normally seeks the resignations of former staffers, he was not. Then, leaving a loophole for "individual cases" he said he was "very glad" to say that "Al Haig has agreed to stay on."

Haig is not the only holdover. Dean Burch is championed by two powerful home state patrons, Arizona's Sen. Barry Goldwater and Rep. John Rhodes; he likely will remain as Cabinet-level counselor. The congressional liaison staff and the national security staffs will be untouched.

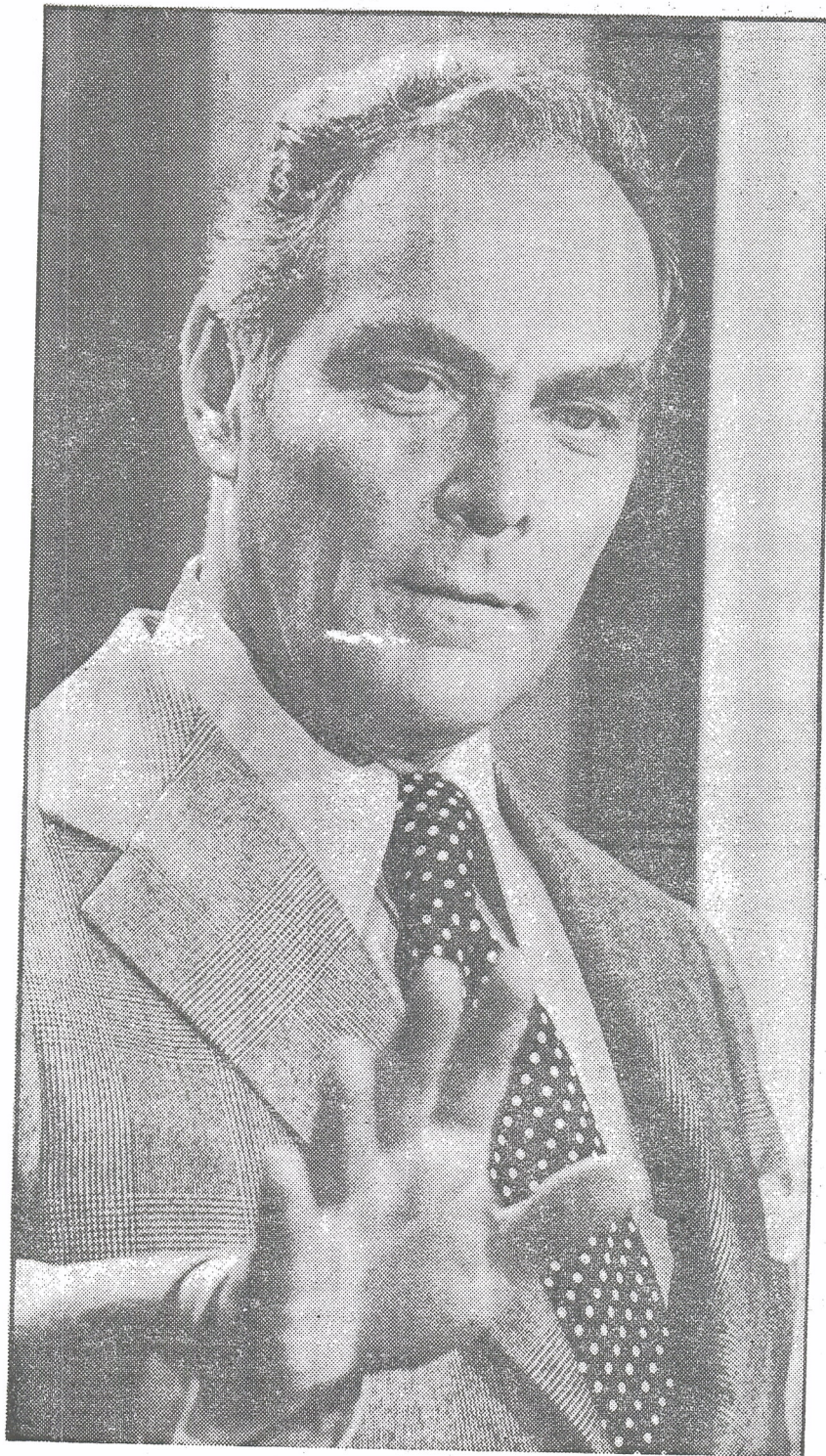
Nevertheless, Mr. Ford's loophole is big enough to insure the termination of many Nixonites: Ken Clawson, chief of communications; Pat Buchanan and most of the other speechwriters; legal aides Fred Buzhardt and Leonard Garment; Roy Ash, director of the Office of Management and Budget. In varying degrees and nature, each is too closely identified with the disgraced President.

Their departure has far less value than Haig's retention. He is the personification of the Nixon staff, both operating at its best and twisting and turning to find an escape hatch as Watergate closed in on President Nixon.

But because of Haig's vital role in setting the resignation stage, there is a minority view. It was summed up by a Ford political intimate this way: "Haig demonstrated his bigness last week, a great American, a tower of strength who made it all happen without betrayal or one ounce of disloyalty. We are all in his debt."

Those words underline the personal and ironic tragedy of Al Haig's meteoric rise to power: despite his heroism in the climactic last days of Richard Nixon, he is nevertheless viewed by most of Mr. Ford's political allies as an encumbrance and a liability. The question is whether Mr. Ford himself comes to agree with that view.

President Ford



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