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2 Men at the Eye of the Watergate Storm

Haig: Sense of Foreboding

By Laurence Stern
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Shortly after Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. assumed his new command in the Watergate-battered White House last May, he confessed a sense of foreboding to a friend and former colleague.

"I feel as though I've taken over a battalion that has just been overrun," he said.

Little has happened since to dispel that sense of siege, particularly in the period since the weekend of what has become known as the "firestorm" in late October, marked by the triple exodus of Archibald Cox, Elliot L.

Richardson and William D. Ruckelshaus.

As the White House political defense perimeter has shrunk under the unrelenting fire of new revelations and new challenges to presidential credibility, so Haig's silhouette has grown as Richard Nixon's point man, his lead rifle.

Haig reflected on this during a conversation in his office Saturday evening.

"Very few men who have occupied that chair," he pointed across the room toward his desk, "have been

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Richardson: New Documents

By Susanna McBee
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Former Attorney General Elliot L. Richardson disclosed yesterday two previously unpublished documents that appear to substantiate his version of the events that led to the firing of Archibald Cox as Watergate special prosecutor.

At issue is the position that Richardson took during the week preceding President Nixon's Oct. 20 firing of Cox for refusing to promise he would never again go to the courts to get additional White House Watergate tapes or documents.

Richardson has said consistently that he had opposed the President's action and had tried to prevent it. But Mr. Nixon and his chief of staff, Alexander M. Haig Jr., were quoted by some Republican senators as saying on Nov. 13 and 14 that Richardson was not telling the truth.

On Nov. 15 the White House issued a statement saying that Richardson had been "articulating" one of "several versions" of what happened before the Cox firing, but it denied that Mr.

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Nixon had actually accused him of lying.

Yet the next day Sen. Edward W. Brooke (R-Mass.) said the President had told him Richardson had agreed both to the restriction on Cox and to a compromise White House plan to let Sen. John C. Stennis (D-Miss.) listen to tapes Cox had already subpoenaed—and two courts had agreed should be produced—and submit authenticated versions of their contents to the U.S. District Court here.

"He was not telling the truth," Brooke quoted Mr. Nixon as saying of Richardson's contention that he had opposed the restriction against future court action by Cox.

In an interview with The Washington Post yesterday, Richardson said Haig called him the evening after Brooke's and other senators' reports were published to say that those reports were not true.

Haig said he and Mr. Nixon had not said that Richardson had lied, the former Attorney General said. "In that conversation he said, 'I don't disagree with anything you said in your testimony.'" Richardson

had repeated his position before the Senate Judiciary Committee on Nov. 6.

In the interview Richardson also produced a four-page draft that he had written Oct. 17 of the so-called Stennis compromise and had sent that morning to the White House. The draft indicates Richardson's approval of the compromise, which he has admitted supporting, but it adds that access by Cox to additional material would be dealt with later.

Specifically, the section, entitled "Other Tapes and Documents," says:

"The proposed arrangement would undertake to cover only the tapes heretofore subpoenaed by the Watergate grand jury at the request of the special prosecutor. Any request by the special prosecutor for a similar report covering other tapes as well as any request by the special prosecutor for memoranda or other documents believed by the special prosecutor to

the same conversations covered by the proposed report would be the subject of subsequent negotiations between the special prosecutor and counsel for the President."

Richardson said the section was removed later that day by the President's counsel, J. Fred Buzhardt, who, according to Richardson, "said he omitted it because it was unnecessary."

Buzhardt "said the proposal didn't deal with anything else" besides the tapes already subpoenaed, Richardson said, "so the paragraph was redundant. So when I redrafted his redraft, I left it out. My redraft of his redraft was the document I sent Cox" that Wednesday, he added.

Cox turned down the proposal after it later became linked with the prohibition on any future court efforts to get further evidence.

Richardson also produced a press release he had written but did not make public Oct. 19, the night before Mr. Nixon fired Cox and accepted the resignations of Richardson and Deputy Attorney General William D. Ruckelshaus. Both quit rather than carry out the President's order to fire the prosecutor.

Cox was fired by Solicitor General Robert H. Bork, who is acting Attorney General.

Richardson said he wrote the press release after receiving a letter Oct. 19 from Mr. Nixon instructing him to direct Cox to make no further judicial attempts to get additional presidential material on the Watergate scandal.

The former Attorney General said the press release "confirms the fact that I had not anticipated any instructions" from Mr. Nixon to cut off Cox's court access. Richardson said he did not release the statement to the press that night as he had planned because, he learned that the White House had not released Mr. Nixon's letter to him.

Instead, Richardson said, he incorporated the release into a letter he wrote Mr. Nixon the next day stating that the price of Cox's access to the subpoenaed tapes through the "Stennis compromise" should not be

"the renunciation of any further attempt by him to resort to judicial process."

Both the Oct. 19 Nixon letter and the Oct. 20 Richardson letter were made public Oct. 23 by Richardson.

The press release that until now was unpublished says:

"The President's decision to call on Sen. Stennis to prepare an authenticated record constitutes, in my view, a reasonable and constructive compromise of the 'Watergate tapes' issue.

"It seems to me inconsistent, however, with the explicit understandings on which I was confirmed and the office of special prosecutor was created for me to deal now with hypothetical future attempts by Mr. Cox to invoke judicial process, and the proposal I presented to Mr. Cox this week would not have attempted to do so.

"I plan to seek an early opportunity to discuss this approach with the President."

On Nov. 18 The Washington Post reported that seven other documents appeared to support Richardson's version of the events leading to Cox's firing despite the reports of the private remarks of Mr. Nixon and Haig.

Richardson was asked yesterday how he feels about those reports, which included a remark allegedly made by Haig referring to drinking by Richardson and an article Nov. 20 in the Knight newspapers that "some top administration officials are quietly indicating" Richardson had a "drinking problem."

"Well, I was at first incredulous," he said, "and then increasingly disturbed. I came to wonder whether this was a systematic effort to discredit me." He said the Knight story "made me very angry and disgusted. I have no reason to doubt the White House denial that they ever said anything like this.

"And I must say everyone in the White House from the President on down that I've ever dealt with is so completely aware that nothing like this has any truth whatever that I would find it hard to believe they could have said it, this morning."

The Knight story quoted an unnamed "agency head" but not anyone in the White House itself.

"Haig also said he was sick over the Knight story," Richardson reported.

Asked if he still wonders about any "systematic" White House effort to discredit him, he replied, "I certainly have a question."

As Richardson reconstructed the events leading to Cox's firing, there was discussion of dismissing him Monday, Oct. 15, in a meeting he had with Haig and Buzhardt. "I said I couldn't go along with it and would have to resign," Richardson said.

On Wednesday, Oct. 17, Cox received the Stennis proposal. The next afternoon Richardson met with Haig, Buzhardt, and White House lawyers Leonard Garment and Charles Alan Wright. They had heard from Cox and "construed Cox's remarks as tantamount to rejection."

Wright, who had learned of the Stennis proposal for the first time, thought it was "a major concession," Richardson recalled. "So I said, 'Why don't you try to sell it, Charlie? Maybe you can do it better than I can.'"

Wright phoned Cox, and Cox told Richardson the next day he interpreted the call as an effort "to elicit rejection," Richardson continued.

On Thursday evening after the White House meeting, Richardson said he understood that the plan would "result in Cox's firing unless he accepted the Stennis proposal" and began writing a "summary of reasons why I must resign."

Friday morning, Oct. 19, Richardson learned for the first time that the future court restriction on Cox had been linked to the Stennis proposal, and, he said, that night he learned of Mr. Nixon's order to him to impose that restriction on Cox.

In the intervening hours, he said, he asked Haig to try to convince the President the link should not be made. "Haig said he had tried, but the President wouldn't go along," Richardson said, adding that he considered Haig's role as one of a conduit only, not as an advocate of the Richardson position.

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able to escape political taint and smear. There are few who haven't been skewered."

He called the roll of some past occupants: Sherman Adams, Walter Jenkins, Bob Haldeman.

"I wasn't naive about it when I came in and I'm not today. You just try to keep from being drawn in. Maybe it won't happen to you. Maybe you won't detect the moment when it begins to happen to you..."

His friend and Democratic mentor, Joseph Califano, said this of Haig:

"I think he's being eaten up. He's being put through a political and moral shredder. It's tough to see a friend go down that way. Nixon, in searching for a way out of Watergate, could destroy Haig."

Outwardly, Haig's vaulting career in the Nixon White House would seem to be a triumph of the work ethic, the West Point Code and the American dream.

He walked into the White House West Basement nearly five years ago with an impeccable military career and the rank of colonel to work in the bureaucratic sweat shop of Henry Kissinger's National Security Council staff.

There was an unending stretch of 13, 14, 15-hour days—six and seven days a week—in an atmosphere of perpetual deadline.

And now he holds the status of a retired four-star general and his spacious official quarters are separated by only a few carpeted feet from the Oval Office of the President of the United States. Although Haig demurs, there are those familiar with White House structure who say his influence ranges over a far broader area of policy—particularly in foreign affairs and national security—than did Bob Haldeman's.

And so... *being eaten up? Going through a shredder?*

Such conjecture has only begun to surface since the weekend of the "firestorm" and Haig's involvement in the Watergate campaign began to surface publicly.

In the view of Califano, who has personally experienced the man-eating demands of the presidency, "Nixon is now in a situation which affects the very marrow of his career and his place in history. No one is doing anything that he has not been told to do by the President. And that is true of Haig more than anyone. He has been forced into a political role. And that is unfortunate."

Haig is aware of the Watergate undertow swirling around his ankles, the familiar pressure that has presaged the undoing of so many in the Nixon administration, his immediate predecessor among them.

"I've gone into battle where the stakes have been more definitive and the outcome less significant than this," Haig tells you in flat, patient tones. "I could have been dead in Korea or Vietnam or elsewhere. But the outcome would have been less significant than this."

And what might be the outcome of the Watergate campaign?

"To contribute to national sanity. To restore a sense of confidence in the office (the voice lingers on that word and the eyes seem to ask if you got it) of the presidency... To show that the presidency is an institution that should not be lightly tampered with, that it is fundamental to the American system."

It is unclear precisely when Haig was assigned his major tactical command in the Battle of Watergate. But his imprint was already on the events on the Monday of the week, Oct. 15, that was to culminate in what has become known as the Saturday Night Massacre.

It was on that day, he has acknowledge, that the firing of Special Prosecutor Cox was raised at a high-level White House conference with then: Attorney General Richardson in attendance. During that meeting Richardson served notice he would be prepared to resign if Cox were to be sacked by the President.

"I was, incidentally, against that approach," Haig volunteered. It was, for the time being, rejected.

Through that week Haig emerged as the President's chief bureaucratic head-knocker within the administration on the Cox affair and the confrontation of the tapes. Richardson's log showed five telephone calls from Haig on Tuesday, Oct. 16.

The Attorney General did not himself get to see the President until the Saturday of the blow up. It was by then too late to put the pieces back together.

Haig fully immersed himself in the President's Watergate counterattack at a crowded press conference in the West Basement on Tuesday, Oct. 23, a session with strongly confrontational overtones between press and presidential spokesmen Haig and attorney Charles Alan Wright.

The session was punctuated by a backdrop of derisive horn-honking from Pennsylvania Avenue prompted by anti-Nixon demonstrators urging motorists to "Honk for Impeachment."

Haig was not only clearly in command but in the forward bunker facing into enemy fire.

When one reporter asked if it were he who ordered the FBI to occupy the premises of the Watergate special prosecutor the night Cox was fired, Haig stepped forward and thrust his face out at them. For a second the urbane bureaucrat's mask gave way to the professional soldier's tight, combative smile.

"Guilty" Gen. Haig barked, almost joyously.

Looking back this weekend at that tense and turbulent meeting with the press, Haig acknowledged that it deepened his own personal involvement in the Watergate quagmire.

~~It was fully aware of the risks when I went into the press room that afternoon.~~ But I had to brief them. There was no one else to do it."

There were, in fact, others. There were White House lawyers Fred Buzhardt and Leonard Garment who were fully versed on the details and legal booby traps surrounding the issues of Cox and the tapes. Why Haig?

A possible answer to that question is that Haig had that one increasingly rare

attribute in the scandal-ridden White House atmosphere—deniability.

For one thing, he had until then stayed clear of Watergate, as far as was publicly known. And he had also been professionally bred under the West Point Code. "A cadet does not lie, cheat or steal..."

(Actually, Haig sat in on one of the early meetings of the White House "plummers" in the late summer of 1971. At issue was who would give lie detector tests—the FBI or CIA—to administration officials to determine the source of a major news leak. The meeting, according to a senior participant, was chaired by the plummers' former chief, Egil Krogh. Also present was Watergate conspirator E. Howard Hunt.)

During the week of the "firestorm," Haig was further cemented into the White House strategy when he was told to direct Richardson and then Ruckelshaus to carry out the presidential mandate to fire Cox.

Haig now claims that his now-famous injunction to Ruckelshaus—"Your commander in chief has given you an order"—has been

quoted out of context in a way that portrays him as a mindless martinet.

"I've been around this town," Haig protests. "I'm not a virgin. I've never used that kind of language."

It is Ruckelshaus' recollection, however, that he did. And there are other recollections that go back 3½ years to the Situation Room of the White House.

It was the eve of the U.S. military incursion into Cambodia. One of Henry Kissinger's top National Security Council aides, William Watts, had just told Kissinger he disapproved of the Cambodian operation and was prepared to resign.

When Haig learned of Watts' declaration to Kis-

singer he angrily confronted his colleague in the Situation Room, witnesses of the episode remember. They recall his flaring at Watts: "You have an order from your commander-in-chief."

Watts, a former political aide to Nelson A. Rockefeller, shot back: "Oh yes I can—and I have."

Haig, the professional soldier of 27 years and the consummate national security bureaucrat, took another giant step toward entanglement in Watergate's political morass when he appeared jointly with Mr. Nixon in closed sessions with Republican lawmakers. It was the beginning of what the White House has called "Operation Candor."

Haig as well as the President, according to senatorial participants in those sessions, strongly implied that Elliot Richardson had lied about his role in the Cox affair.

He went so far, according to some senatorial witnesses, as to suggest that Richardson reversed himself at the last minute on the issue of Cox's dismissal as a political ploy aimed at winning the Massachusetts governorship.

In the current contretemps between Richardson and the President over the firing of Cox, public credibility is an important value.

Richardson's version was that he consistently opposed any attempt to limit Cox's

access to the courts in gathering presidential evidence. He also denied statements laid to Haig that he originally acquiesced in the firing of Cox.

The issue of who was telling the truth is more than a frivolity. There is now talk on Capitol Hill of taking sworn testimony from both sides on just what happened within the administration the week of the Saturday Night Massacre.

"This dispute is being blown up by some people," Haig insists. "Not by Elliot certainly but by other people. Elliot and I have great mutual respect and confidence—I certainly have for him. We lived through a lot together—the Agnew thing."

Sitting in the evening quiet of his White House office down the hall from the President last weekend, Haig spoke in tones of stolid foreboding about the future.

He had been looking forward to 12 more years of military service at the time he accepted the job of chief of staff to the President. He realized he was jeopardizing a military career. At the same time, he had won his four stars during the period of White House service and had been jumped over scores of more senior officers.

"One of my closest friends in government called me up after I had been offered this appointment and said, 'Al, don't do it. You're going to

be ground up,'" he recalled. It remains to be seen whether the advice was right.

Haig is now a 48-year-old retired general who ranks first in the official presidential family. But the future is colored in tones of somber ambiguity. Watergate has been a voracious destroyer of men and reputations.

"I'm not interested in politics—but I might well be interested in continued public service. It's possible I could emerge from this so scarred that this would no longer be an option.

"At this stage, I don't look further than today. Public service has become a risky business," Gen. Haig now realizes.