

Haig Sees Nixon Near 'End of Tunnel'

By JOHN HERBERS

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 7—"We can see the end of the tunnel," Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr., the White House chief of staff, said of President Nixon's troubles in a recent interview.

Then, with a grin that seemed to acknowledge that the military had said the same of Vietnam in 1965, he used another metaphor, "We can see the bottom of the barrel."

Nevertheless, his assessment of the president's fortunes acknowledged great difficulties ahead.

Since General Haig became the President's No. 1 assistant eight months ago, his authority and role in the Government have been on the rise. Some members of the White House staff say he now carries far more responsibilities than did his predecessor, H. R. Halde-
man.

As one crisis after another has beset the White House and the President's credibility has steadily declined, Mr. Nixon has increasingly delegated duties to General Haig, who is almost constantly at his side. He is undoubtedly second in power in the Administration.

Opened Up Office

Despite the grinding conditions under which he works, General Haig, unlike his predecessor, continues to win praise from political leaders, Cabinet members and other persons for making the President's office more open to them.

Yet those in Washington who have known the 49-year-old career Army man over the years speak of him more in sympathy than in envy of his power and eminence. Some of them criticize the President for putting him into political situations for which he was not trained.

General Haig speaks wistfully of military life.

"It was all I ever expected to do," he said.

He was a four-star general and Army Vice Chief of Staff when Mr. Nixon called him back to the White House, where he had been deputy to Henry A. Kissinger on the National Security Council in the first Nixon term.

When he first took the White House post, it was understood that after a period he would return to the Army in another high position. But he has now been at the White House so long, at the President's insistence, that the military establishment has put out the word that he is not wanted back because of the political nature of his job.

No Independent Stance

Over the months, he has become intimately associated with the President and, unlike Mr. Kissinger, he is unable, as the President's right-hand man, to establish an independent reputation.

When he took the job in the early summer, he wanted to have no connection with the Watergate scandals, but rather to cleanse the White House of the taint.

Yet he became deeply involved in the dismissal of the special Watergate prosecutor, Archibald Cox, and the controversy over missing portions of the Watergate tapes. He was principally involved in the hiring and ousting of lawyers for the President's Watergate defense and to some extent in developing the President's political strategy.

Now he is so much a part of the Nixon White House and Watergate matters that he, like the President, is toughing it out and hoping for the best. He indicated that his only plan for

the future was getting over the next few months.

In the interview, General Haig said that what he meant by seeing the bottom of the barrel was that now, for the first time, the Nixon Presidency is no longer groping "down a dark alley" where unseen dangers lurk. Now, the dangers are there, he said, but they are visible.

Smooth Operation

Aside from the defense on Watergate matters, General Haig believes that the departments and agencies, after many disruptions and changes, are now in good hands and operating smoothly. He believes that William E. Simon, Director of the Federal Energy Office, has moved effectively in the energy crisis and that that will be less of a problem from now on. He is also pleased with the early performance of William B. Saxbe as attorney General.

The general said he considered himself a conduit for the President rather than a policy maker, that he would not pretend to interfere in domestic affairs, an area in which he has had no experience, and that his former chief, Mr. Kissinger, had foreign affairs well under control.

Yet powerful Presidential assistants have been describ-

ing themselves for years as conduits, and Mr. Nixon delegates so much authority that some who work under him in the White House say that General Haig has to be an important factor, both in the shaping of the President's Watergate defense and in the running of the Government.

Last fall, when the energy shortage became acute and the Government was in disarray over how to deal with it, General Haig stepped in as referee, oversaw the reorganization and was chiefly responsible for the selection of Mr. Simon as energy chief. He has played a role, frequently decisive, White House sources say, in every high appointment made by the President since he became chief of staff.

He maintains contacts with a wide range of officials and political leaders in Congress. When the Senate minority floor leader, Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, wanted the White House to get him off the hook for saying that the Watergate tapes showed that John W. Dean 3d's testimony against the President was false, it was General Haig who arranged for James D. St. Clair, the President's chief Watergate lawyer, to issue a statement saying as much.