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# The Road to Resignation

Highly secret talks between White House chief of staff Alexander Haig and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, together with extremely delicate planning between Haig and three senior Republicans in Congress, finally resolved the crucial question of extracting a presidential resignation: Who would bell the cat and how?

The simple facts of Richard Nixon's last four days in office, filled with emotionally draining details which compelled his resignation Friday, began with a telephone call from Haig to Kissinger on Wednesday, July 31.

Haig, trusting no one outside the closed White House inner circle so much as his former boss on the National Security Council staff, gave Kissinger the bareboned details of the infamous June 23, 1972, tapes.

Kissinger, too, was appalled. Possessing primacy in the cabinet, as well as the greatest store of national and world prestige of any American, Kissinger was immediately perceived by Haig as the single person in the Nixon administration who still could wield influence over the President.

During the next five days of the Nation's ordeal, Kissinger was approached in highly oblique fashion by powerful Republicans. Would there be some way for the cabinet to bell the cat—to inform the President that only by speedy resignation could the nation be salvaged from a far worse ordeal?

The proposal was discarded. "For such a purpose, the cabinet did not exist," one cabinet member explained. "There was only Henry."

Kissinger's central role in belling the cat was underscored by the crucial nature of his job. High State Department officials calculated the agonies that might spring from prolonged chaos and the threat to the legitimacy of the U.S. government. Outbreak of a major crisis, not then perceived but



Henry Kissinger



Alexander Haig

never to be ruled out, could prove disastrous with a President lacking the moral authority to marshal the country's backing.

A more subtle problem: The longer it took to bell the cat, the more likely that foreign countries would find it irresistible to exploit the vacuum and, in one diplomat's phrase, "raise the asking price by 5 per cent in all our negotiations across the board."

So it came down to Kissinger. What he did and how he did it may never be known fully. But he fairly lived with

the President and Haig those last four days.

The aid of Republican congressional leaders was quickly enlisted by Haig. Sen. Barry Goldwater, Sen. Hugh Scott and Rep. John Rhodes knew Mr. Nixon was finished the moment Haig sent James St. Clair, the President's lawyer, to brief them on the June 23 tapes in the early afternoon of Monday, Aug. 5.

Haig's plan was terse and simple: The deadly danger of a leaderless America in world politics was being demonstrated to Mr. Nixon in undra-

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matic fashion by Kissinger (the tireless propounder of national "legitimacy"); the hard facts of the President's collapse in Congress must be demonstrated to Mr. Nixon in the same way by the congressional leaders.

Haig's advice to the men of Congress was sound: He himself had provided the bare facts to Mr. Nixon "with the bark on." He was buttressed in this by White House congressional liaison chief William Timmons, who provided Mr. Nixon with what Haig called "a running count on the damage assessment" in Congress. What Haig needed to bell the cat was proof before the President's eyes that there was no honorable way out except resignation.

Goldwater, Scott and Rhodes were cautioned by Haig: Don't push, be honest and fair, or resignation won't happen.

The three party elders arrived in the Oval Office agreed among themselves that belling the cat must be a purely Republican affair. As one told us: "Only Republicans could grapple with the disaster that had struck the country and the Republican Party."

And so they laid the evidence starkly on Mr. Nixon's desk. They avoided the word "resignation," sticking to the bare facts, just as Haig and Kissinger, in playing their own parts in the funereal drama, stuck to the bare facts.

The last time he cried, Mr. Nixon told them, was on the death of Dwight Eisenhower. He wanted "no tears" now and "no bloodshed." When the leaders left, Mr. Nixon's choice was simply unavoidable.

Haig, Kissinger, Goldwater, Scott, Rhodes. They had performed a horrendous task, unknown in 200 years of American history, and performed it effectively, discreetly and with a certain nobility.