

The Political General

By Jerome K. Walsh

The news that Gen. Alexander M. Haig Jr. is expected to be recalled to active duty and appointed supreme commander of NATO should be disturbing to anyone concerned about keeping the Army out of politics and politics out of the Army. Without questioning in any way General Haig's qualifications for the job or his performance as White House chief of staff, his return to active duty in a high position in the Army would set a bad precedent.

When he resigned his commission to enter political life as President Nixon's chief adviser, General Haig was already more of a "political general" than we are accustomed to in this country as a result of his first White House assignment. As Henry Kissinger's deputy during President Nixon's first term, General Haig was permitted then (though an Army officer on active duty) to function in a visible way in the formulation and implementation of politically controversial policies relating to Vietnam. Thereafter, President Nixon appointed him Vice Chief of Staff of the Army, with four star rank, over the heads of hundreds of more senior officers. Obviously, this appointment did not discourage ambitious career officers from involvement in political matters.

Before assuming the position of White House chief of staff General Haig had to resign his commission as a regular Army officer. The executive power of Government could not have been exercised through a senior Army general without making a mockery of the idea that the United States military stays out of politics. General Haig had to become a civilian in order to enter the political arena, and for fifteen months he has occupied a unique political position as the principal adviser for two Presidents. If he is now recalled to active duty in a very senior position in the Army, his resignation fifteen months ago will take on the appearance of a fig leaf designed to conceal an active political role by the Army in the Nixon Administration.

That General Haig has not functioned in the White House as a representative of the Army is irrelevant. In the future, should the Army ever be tempted to intervene in politics, the Haig experience would make it easier.

Jerome Walsh is an attorney.