

Alexander Haig (1924-2010): Long-time enforcer for American imperialism

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22 February 2010

Alexander Haig, the former White House chief of staff, NATO commander, and secretary of state, died Saturday at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore at the age of 85. He held top positions in the Nixon, Ford, Carter and Reagan administrations, serving in one post or another almost continuously from 1969 through 1982.

The Sunday newspapers were filled with lengthy and respectful accolades to Haig's long career. The White House issued a statement in which President Obama declared that the general "exemplified our finest warrior-diplomat tradition of those who dedicate their lives to public service."

Panegyrics and boilerplate aside, Haig was a trailblazer for a modern reactionary type, the political general, who crosses over from the uniformed military to high political office. Haig's career reflected the growth of the military's power and influence over political life in the US.

In his wake, the path from military to civilian office has become more common, embodied most famously by Gen. Colin Powell, secretary of state for George W. Bush, and by a slew of retired generals who now hold office in the Obama administration, including Gen. James Jones (national security adviser), Admiral Dennis Blair (director of national intelligence), Gen. Eric Shinseki (secretary of veterans affairs), Gen. Scott Gration (chief US negotiator with Sudan), and Gen. Karl Eikenberry (US ambassador to Afghanistan).

In his dozen years at the summit of the American state, Haig shared responsibility for many of the most notorious crimes of American imperialism. To name only a few: the continuation of the war in Vietnam (1969-73), the US invasions of Cambodia (1970) and Laos (1971), the Christmas bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong (1972), the CIA-backed coup in Chile (1973), US support for military death squad regimes in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (1981-82), the arming of the contra terrorists against Nicaragua (1981-82), and US backing for the Israeli bombing of Iraq (1981) and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982).

Haig was a 1947 West Point graduate who quickly displayed an ability to hook up with powerful sponsors in the military and political apparatus, beginning with his work as a junior staff aide to Gen. Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War (1950-51).

During the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in the early and mid-1960s, Haig was chosen by then-Army Secretary Cyrus Vance as his military assistant and subsequently selected by

Joseph Califano, a special assistant to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, as his deputy. He commanded a brigade in Vietnam in 1966-67, his only military service in a combat role.

With the election of Richard Nixon in November 1968, Haig began a meteoric rise. Henry Kissinger, national security adviser in the incoming administration, selected then-Colonel Haig as his military assistant. Within nine months Haig was promoted to brigadier general.

One of his tasks was to facilitate Kissinger's request for the wiretapping of 17 journalists and government officials suspected of dissent on Vietnam.

Haig served as Kissinger's point man on many sensitive missions, including the first Nixon visit to China in 1972, and the browbeating of the president of South Vietnam, Nguyen Van Thieu, into accepting the 1973 Paris agreement that ended direct US involvement in the Vietnam War.

Soon after this action, Haig was promoted over 240 more senior officers to become a four-star general and vice chief of staff of the Army. But within a matter of months, the crisis of the Nixon administration over the Watergate scandal brought Haig back to the White House.

In May 1973, after the forced resignation of Nixon's two top White House aides, H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, Haig was named White House chief of staff. His mentor, Kissinger, told him at the time that with Nixon increasingly preoccupied with Watergate, Haig would have to hold the country together while Kissinger oversaw US imperialist policy internationally.

For the next 18 months, Haig functioned as the day-to-day de facto head of the US government. He thus shares major responsibility for such atrocities as the military coup in Chile, on September 11, 1973, which had the fervent backing of Kissinger and the CIA and led to the killing of tens of thousands of people, including the elected president of Chile, Salvador Allende. He was also instrumental in Washington's backing for Israel in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, after which the US virtually rebuilt the Israeli war machine with a resupply operation that made up for the losses suffered in battle with Egypt and Syria.

At first, Haig backed Nixon's hard-line opposition to the Watergate investigation, urging him to destroy the tapes of White House conversations when their existence became public. In October 1973, after Attorney General Eliot Richardson refused to fire the Watergate special prosecutor, Archibald Cox, and resigned instead, Haig told the acting attorney general, William

Ruckelshaus, “Your commander in chief has given you an order” to fire Cox. Ruckelshaus also resigned, and it was left to the third-ranking official in the Justice Department, Robert Bork, to carry out the firing, an action that triggered House impeachment hearings against Nixon.

Haig was not, however, a Nixon loyalist, and appeared to have no fixed political beliefs except personal ambition, tied inextricably to the defense of the American state. By the summer of 1974, he had concluded that Nixon would have to resign, and he spoke with Vice President Gerald Ford on August 1, 1974, telling him to prepare to assume the presidency and broaching the subject of a pardon for Nixon. During Nixon’s final days in the White House, Haig told the president’s doctors to cut off his access to tranquilizers and sleeping pills.

After Nixon’s resignation, Haig stayed on at the White House for another six weeks, overseeing the transition to Ford, the Nixon pardon, and the selection of former New York governor Nelson Rockefeller to fill the now-vacant position of vice president. Ford rewarded him with the appointment as supreme commander of NATO, one of the top positions in the US military hierarchy. When Democrat Jimmy Carter succeeded Ford, he kept Haig in that position until 1979, when Haig retired from the military to become president of United Technologies, the huge defense contractor.

Haig’s second tour in high office came with the election of Ronald Reagan a year later. Haig was a campaign adviser on foreign policy and was named secretary of state, in one of Reagan’s first appointments. He held that position for nearly 18 months, before Reagan ordered his resignation (which Haig had not actually offered) on June 24, 1982.

His ouster was triggered by deep divisions within the Reagan administration over the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, which was coming to a head in the siege of Palestine Liberation Organization forces in Beirut—an assault that promised to culminate in a bloodbath. Haig was the most fervent protagonist of all-out military action to destroy the PLO, ignoring the pleas of Arab regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, that mass slaughter in Beirut would lead to political upheavals throughout the Middle East. Haig was quickly replaced by George Shultz, the CEO of Bechtel Corporation, a construction giant with close ties to the Saudis. Ultimately, a deal was worked out with PLO leader Yasser Arafat to withdraw PLO forces into exile in Tunisia.

Haig had repeated clashes with the Reagan White House before his dismissal. Some of them were personal and bureaucratic—he wanted foreign policy decision-making concentrated in the State Department, not the White House National Security Council. There were, however, policy issues underlying clashes with those like National Security Adviser William Clark and his deputy, Richard Allen, who wanted a more inflexible policy towards the Soviet Union.

Haig was himself an inveterate Cold Warrior, seeing even the smallest and most remote insurgency in the Third World as a manifestation of “international terrorism,” whose ultimate source was the Soviet Union. In testimony before a congressional committee in March 1981, he declared, “We and our allies are now more vulnerable to international unrest and violent change,”

adding, in reference to contemporary convulsions in the financial markets, “Economic dislocations of this magnitude create conditions for violent disruptions with dangerous political consequences.”

As a veteran of the Nixon-Kissinger era, however, Haig was well aware of the willingness of Moscow and Beijing to sell out national liberation struggles in return for concessions from Washington. This led to friction with a Reagan White House that rejected any concessions to the Stalinist bureaucracy in favor of an all-out military buildup and threats of nuclear war. Reagan delivered his first “star wars” speech only weeks after Haig’s removal.

The newspaper obituaries of Haig gave great prominence to his declaration to the press, on April 3, 1981, only moments after the attempted assassination of Reagan by John Hinckley, that “As of now, I am in control here in the White House.” Noting that Vice President Bush was outside the capital and on his way back, Haig went on to say, “Constitutionally, gentlemen, you have the president, the vice president and the secretary of state, in that order.”

This statement was not merely a gross misrepresentation of the actual constitutional order of succession—leaving out, significantly, the two congressional leaders who follow the vice president, the speaker of the House and the president pro-tem of the Senate. It was also an expression of the instinctive will to power of the military brass under conditions of political crisis and uncertainty.

The *Bulletin*, newspaper of the Workers League, the forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, took note of this aspect of Haig’s career in a comment on September 10, 1974 on his appointment to the NATO position. We wrote: “The rise of Alexander Haig represents the growing power of the American military within the government and, in fact, its tendency to emerge as a predominant influence under conditions of the deepest political crisis within the ruling class.”

Today this threat to democratic rights has developed to a far higher level, with the Haigs of this generation—Petraeus, McChrystal and others—openly vying for influence over policy and chafing at the traditional constitutional restrictions that decree the subordination of the uniformed military to civilian authority.



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