

General Haig: A Great Warrior for Freedom Passes

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It was June 25, 1950. Alexander Haig Jr., then just a junior Army officer fresh out of West Point and assigned to the staff of Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Tokyo, took the phone call offering ominous news: The North Korean communists had just crossed the 38th parallel and started a war.



Haig awoke a sleeping MacArthur to inform him of the surprise attack.

When Haig passed away Saturday at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Md., after a short illness, his career of public and private service, beginning as an aide to MacArthur, had spanned more than six decades. In all, his professional life cut a broad swath, covering fully one-quarter of the nation's history.

A Time magazine profile of Haig in 1984 best distilled the man's unique place in American history: "Few American public figures have had such tempestuous careers. Alexander M. Haig, Jr. has spent much of his life in war zones — bureaucratic and geopolitical."

Haig's life was no time marker. He was, in fact, an actor and player in some of the most momentous events of our times: President Nixon's opening of China, the tumult of Watergate, the global crisis under Jimmy Carter, the rollback of communism under Reagan, and even the emergence of the Internet as a force in American life.

Earning His Stripes

In the bloody carnage of Vietnam, the West Point man served as a battalion and brigade

commander.

Lt. Col. Haig was a battalion commander in Vietnam when he won the Distinguished Service Cross during a battle near An Loc. He went on to command a brigade.

As the CO of 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry, 1st Infantry Division, Haig boarded a helicopter and flew to where his troops were engaging a superior enemy force. An excerpt from Haig's citation for his exceptional conduct follows:

“When two of his companies were engaged by a large hostile force, Colonel Haig landed amid a hail of fire, personally took charge of the units, called for artillery and air fire support and succeeded in soundly defeating the insurgent force. . . the next day a barrage of 400 rounds was fired by the Viet Cong, but it was ineffective because of the warning and preparations by Colonel Haig.

“As the barrage subsided, a force three times larger than his began a series of human wave assaults on the camp. Heedless of the danger himself, Colonel Haig repeatedly braved intense hostile fire to survey the battlefield. His personal courage and determination, and his skillful employment of every defense and support tactic possible, inspired his men to fight with previously unimagined power.

“Although his force was outnumbered three to one, Colonel Haig succeeded in inflicting 592 casualties on the Viet Cong.”

The crucible of this war was followed by a tour as the brusque and efficient aide-de-camp to President Nixon's national security adviser, Henry Kissinger.

Nixon, impressed with both the political and military skills of Kissinger's young aide, eventually tapped him to be his White House chief of staff.

During this time, Haig would serve the nation as a force of stability during the nation-rattling shock and aftershocks of Watergate.

Haig was instrumental in the painful negotiations leading to Nixon's resignation in August 1974, and to Gerald Ford's accession as commander in chief. Bob Woodward's 2001 book “Shadow” describes Haig's role as the indispensable point man between Nixon and then-Vice President Ford during the final days of Watergate.

After Richard Nixon's presidency ended, Ford put Haig back into uniform, appointing him NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in Europe.

On June 25, 1979, Haig was the target of an assassination attempt in Mons, Belgium. A land mine detonated under a bridge as Haig's car passed over it, narrowly missing Haig's car but wounding three of his bodyguards in a car that was following it. The Red Army Faction was blamed, and a German court sentenced an RAF member to prison for the assassination attempt.

In July 1979, Haig resigned from his NATO post, reportedly because of President Jimmy Carter's efforts to remove the Shah of Iran from power during the Iranian Revolution. Haig predicted that the fall of America's strong ally, the Shah, would lead to negative repercussions throughout the region. Haig once said in an interview that the Carter administration "stabbed him [the Shah] in the back."

'I Am in Control' – What Really Happened

"But it was during his tenure as Ronald Reagan's secretary of state that Haig found himself most embattled," reported Time magazine. In a memoir, "Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy," published in 1984, Haig recounted his tumultuous tenure as commander of his nation's foreign policy juggernaut.

Critics quickly charged into the fray claiming that the military man was temperamentally unsuited for the statesman-like position of chief diplomat.

Haig, dubbed the "vicar" of Reagan's foreign policy, appeared to be the ideal man for Reagan's "respected, not loved" foreign policy, especially in enforcing his tough stance toward the Soviet Union and its client states.

Haig quickly earned friends and enemies — even within the Reagan camp — for his strong policy positions toward Cuba, Afghanistan, Poland, Lebanon, the Falklands, and Nicaragua. A staunch friend of Israel, he angered many in the Reagan administration by opposing arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

Haig once described Reagan's close advisers as "foreign policy amateurs," who fretted only about the domestic repercussions of global issues.

Perhaps ironically, of all the flaps during the 18 months of his service as secretary of state, Haig may be remembered best for his famous "I'm in control" statement — fatefully uttered on the afternoon of March 30, 1981.

The nation's new president, Ronald Reagan, had just been shot leaving a Washington hotel. Wounded grievously along with the president was press secretary James Brady, police officer Tom Delahanty, and Secret Service agent Tim McCarthy.

No one knew at the time that shooter John Hinckley was a deranged young man who acted completely alone.

In the Situation Room in the White House, key members of the president's Cabinet and national security team assembled. It was a long-believed Pentagon view that a Soviet nuclear attack on the United States might be preceded by a "decapitation" of the federal leadership, including assassinations of the president and the vice president, creating chaos and breaking the chain of command.

At the time, the Cold War was still hot. The Soviet army seemed poised to invade Poland, and lurking Soviet nuclear missile subs had strayed closer to the Atlantic seaboard than usual. The Kremlin also had been angrily denouncing the cowboy Reagan as too militaristic.

This was the background as the president was in surgery and rendered unconscious with general anesthesia.

Secretary of State Haig was trying to reach Vice President George H.W. Bush, who was airborne somewhere over Texas. National security adviser Richard Allen was frantically rounding up the codes to release nuclear weapons, and White house lawyer Fred Fielding was preparing for a transfer of presidential power.

According to presidential counselor Ed Meese, Haig gave voice to a very salient question: “Who’s minding the store?”

A military man, always cognizant of the vital links of chain of command, Haig and other senior officials watched the television incredulously as a member of the press asked neophyte deputy White House spokesman Larry Speakes who exactly was in charge of the federal government. Speakes’ response was vague and uncertain.

Haig announced he would rush up to the press room to reassure friends and enemies that the U.S. government was running smoothly. Haig had to climb a flight of stairs to make his way there. He quickly took the podium, somewhat out of breath and sounding shaky, and announced:

“Constitutionally gentlemen, you have the president, the vice president and the secretary of state, in that order, and should the president decide he wants to transfer the helm to the vice president, he will do so. As for now, I’m in control here, in the White House, pending the return of the vice president and in close touch with him. If something came up, I would check with him, of course.”

Years later, Haig explained: “What I meant was, we had to run a government. We had to have an authority to send all the messages out, to speak should we find it was a conspiracy and to take appropriate action, if necessary, pending return of the vice president.”

In fact, the Constitution does mention the secretary of state in the transfer of power, placing him fourth in line for the presidency.

“I wasn’t talking about transition,” Haig said. “I was talking about the executive branch — who is running the government. That was the question asked. It was not, ‘Who is in line should the president die?’”

But Reagan survived, the vice president soon returned to Washington, and normalcy was restored. Haig became a convenient punching bag for critics in the press and adversaries

in political struggles in the Reagan White House.

Audiotapes of what took place in the Situation Room, released in recent years, back up Haig's account of how events unfolded that day. One was Haig's claim that the United States came perilously close to igniting a confrontation with the Soviet Union.

Defense Secretary Caspar "Cap" Weinberger told all present in the Situation Room that the Pentagon had not raised the alert status of U.S. troops. Haig bought that line and repeated it publicly.

"There are absolutely no alert measures that are necessary at this time or contemplated," Haig told reporters.

But unknown to Haig, Weinberger had approved an increase in the alert status to Defcon 2. SAC pilots were manning nuclear bombers and firing up their engines – all in readiness for a potential Soviet attack.

"I said up there, Cap, I am not a liar. I said there had been no increased alert," Haig told Weinberger, according to a tape of the incident that emerged years later.

Haig feared that the Soviets would see U.S. officials, including himself, claim there was no increase in America's alert status, but meanwhile gather intelligence indicating the opposite. The Soviets, paranoid to begin with, could misinterpret the events and believe the United States was planning a surprise attack.

Haig's actions that fateful day have become the stuff of urban myths. Even Oliver Stone got into the mix, with his made-for-cable movie "The Day Reagan Was Shot." The eccentric director asserted in his film that Haig (played by Richard Dreyfuss) actually tried to leverage the shooting of Reagan into a full-blown military coup.

The truth was the opposite: Haig had been a calming figure during the turmoil of the day. The audiotapes contradicted Stone's wild claims, and he had to temper the movie's spin by stressing it was a fictional representation of events. He even offered personal praise for Haig's taking responsibility during the confusion of the day.

Haig was the warrior caught up in a civilian fire drill. Political correctness was trumped by the natural instincts of the military leader – and Haig was the textbook military leader.

Never apologetic about the incident, Haig once dismissed the furor with: "I don't worry about the midgets."

1988 Presidential Run

Haig's actions on the day Reagan was shot did not lead to his departure as secretary of state, but they helped lay the groundwork. And on June 25, 1982, he resigned from the job, a resignation Reagan pushed for.

Though his time as secretary of state was short, Haig had played a role in laying the groundwork for Reagan's rollback of the Soviet Union. But Haig had pointed out that the heavy lifting that made possible the undoing of the Soviet empire had been completed in the Nixon administration.

Nixon's opening of relations with China divided the world's two great communist powers, and the Soviets became weakened and vulnerable. Reagan exploited this division to the fullest, but Haig had helped to make it happen during his days in the Nixon White House.

After leaving government service for the last time, Gen. Haig focused most of his energies on private business.

He became chairman of his own advisory firm, Worldwide Associates Inc., assisting corporations around the world by providing strategic advice on political, economic, commercial and security matters.

But he still had the political bug in him. In 1988, Haig entered the GOP primary fray to succeed Reagan. Soon he was in a scrappy battle for the Republican presidential nomination with Vice President George Bush.

Haig questioned Bush's record and called on the vice president to give a full explanation of his role in the Iran-Contra affair.

In speeches in New York City and Manchester, N.H., the then-62-year-old former secretary of state said his more than four decades of public service qualified him for the job. "The 1988 campaign is going to be primarily about leadership, competence, experience with the complex array of affairs that constitute the national interest. I will be the nominee of the party."

Despite his signature brash confidence, the Haig presidential bid never gained traction.

Languishing at the bottom of the Republican field, Haig withdrew from the presidential race and turned over his support to Sen. Robert J. Dole, whom he described as "head and shoulders above George Bush as a potential president."

AOL and the Internet

Though Haig will be remembered as a political and military figure, he was also a successful business executive.

After resigning as NATO's Supreme Allied Commander in 1979, Haig became President, CEO, and a director of United Technologies, a major defense contractor. He held the job until Reagan nominated him for secretary of state in 1981. (In later years, Haig would note that, by leaving United Technologies, he was forced to cash out stock options to

avoid conflicts of interest in the government. Had he held these stock options, he would have reaped hundreds of millions. Haig would say he never regretted the financial loss for the chance to serve his country.)

Upon his departure from the Reagan administration, Haig turned again to business and served as a member of the board of directors of Metro-Goldwyn Mayer Inc., MGM Mirage Inc., and Indevus Pharmaceuticals Inc., and as chairman of the board of DOR BioPharma Inc. He also served on the international advisory board of Newsmax Media.

Perhaps his most notable board position was as a founding director of America Online. In the mid-1980s, a West Point friend of Haig's was an investor in a Virginia company called Quantum. His friend asked Haig to join the board. The company was facing bankruptcy, and Haig's friend wanted Haig to see how he could help close down the software company to get his money back.

But Haig was impressed by a young marketing executive at Quantum named Steve Case. Haig helped persuade his friend to give Case and the beleaguered company a chance. The friend agreed, reluctantly.

In 1989, Quantum changed its name to America Online and offered online games to paid subscribers. Under Case's leadership, America Online (AOL) became an early behemoth in the Internet world, and in 2001, merged with Time Warner in a historic \$164 billion transaction.

The AOL-Time merger later soured and Haig remarked that he had pushed AOL's Case to avoid the old media play altogether and instead make a bid for Amazon, whose founder, Jeff Bezos, was open to a deal.

Out of government service, Haig was a frequent commentator on networks such as CNBC, Fox, and MSNBC. He also hosted the television program "World Business Review" for several years, followed by yet another hosting tour of duty on "21st Century Business," with programs featuring expert interviews, commentary and field reports.

In MacArthur's Footsteps

The remarkable Haig leadership trait reared up very soon after his graduation from the U.S. Military Academy. Early in his career, junior officer Haig impressed high-ranking superiors — not the least of which was his one-time boss Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

In several ways, Haig was an heir to the great general's legacy. MacArthur had been known as the "Republicans' General" who had defeated the Japanese while limiting U.S. casualties.

MacArthur was touted as a presidential candidate, and remained wildly popular after President Truman fired him during the Korean War. The general argued that political considerations should not interfere with military victory in Korea, a view that resonated

with Haig.

For sure, Haig was molded under MacArthur, serving as the administrative assistant to the chief of staff of the Far East Command and, during the early part of the Korean War, as aide to the X Corps commander. Earning his captain's "railroad tracks" in late 1950, he got out from behind his desk and into combat, going ashore at the Inchon landings – the tactical brainchild of his genius mentor MacArthur.

Capt. Haig was responsible for maintaining Gen. MacArthur's situation map and briefing MacArthur each evening on the day's battleground progress. Haig recounts that he was on hand when MacArthur famously stated to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Gentlemen, we will land at Inchon on September 15 or you will have a new Supreme Commander in East Asia."

In a speech he gave on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Korean War armistice, Haig offered a telling insight into the hero of Inchon: "When I informed him that this or that young man had been killed or captured, I was amazed to see that our losses were of profound and, at times, even tearful concern to this remarkable soldier."

His time with MacArthur was just the beginning of Haig's long career in which he would see world leaders up close and personal.

In 1992, Haig published his memoir, "Inner Circles: How America Changed the World." In it, he fleshed out his unique insider status in the halls of power, revealing such nuggets as President Lyndon Johnson's theories on the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the indecision in the Oval Office at the beginning of the Vietnam War, and Henry Kissinger's confrontation with J. Edgar Hoover.

Haig is the most poignant in his own recounting of Richard Nixon's final hours at the White House as president: "We went together to the Lincoln Sitting Room, his favorite place. The only light came from a log fire on the hearth.

"He began to talk. He spoke about his predecessors and the times of doubt and anguish through which nearly all of them had passed. Not a single word did he speak about his own tragedy. He uttered no recriminations. He had lost the thing he wanted all his life, but he seemed to be at peace.

"I left him there, sitting alone in the dark. When I returned, shortly after dawn, Nixon was still in the same chair. He had a way of sitting on the small of his back, and that was how he was sitting now. The gray light of morning filled the room. There was the smell of a fire that had died. On a table lay a stack of books — the memoirs of presidents. In each, he had inserted a slip of paper, marking a place where he had found something of interest.

"That is how Nixon had spent his last night as president. He had been seeking solace from the only men who could truly know what he was feeling — his kinsmen in history."

Perhaps unknowingly, Haig himself had gone from the “long gray line” of West Point to become one of the great kinsmen in U.S. history.

The process of his life had made Haig more than a military man. He had become a realist, a pragmatist, and an honest voice for his country’s interests.

In an address in 2004, he urged Washington leaders to “engage in a little intellectual hygiene” and sharply criticized President George W. Bush’s “war on terror” foreign policy:

“The notion that the United States can remake the world in its own image, on its own, as a reaction to violence from abroad dates from Woodrow Wilson’s time. It’s an old populist con detached from reality; calling it a neo-con doesn’t make it any better. Does anyone believe that the United States can turn Afghanistan and Iraq into thriving democracies; reconcile India and Pakistan; transform the Middle East and do it all with a 10-division army and a \$500 billion deficit?”

For sure, the great man was thinking not just of his country but also of his family: wife Patricia (they married in 1950), sons Alex and Brian, and daughter Barbara. Brian followed his dad’s example, graduating from West Point and having a distinguished military career before becoming an acclaimed author of popular fiction.

Haig may have composed his own best epitaph when he wrote of a simple blueprint for living life: “Practice rather than preach. Make of your life an affirmation, defined by your ideals, not the negation of others. Dare to the level of your capability then go beyond to a higher level.”

Alexander Haig also could add what he learned on MacArthur’s staff: Always be ready for the call, always be ready to answer it for your country. On both counts, he was.