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## CAVEAT Realism, Reagan And Foreign Policy

# ALEXANDER Haig

### ■ "Al, Join My Team"

When Ronald Reagan asked me to be his Secretary of State. I had spent no more than three hours alone with him. In the fall of 1978, Reagan and I met at his home on the heights above Los Angeles. The evening had been arranged by Richard Allen, whom I had known as an uneasy member of Henry Kissinger's staff on the National Security Council. Allen was now Reagan's foreign policy adviser. I was still Supreme Allied Commander in Europe. I had made some statements about U.S. policy toward the Soviets that the press had interpreted as being critical of the policies of my Commander in Chief, President Jimmy Carter. Thereupon Allen had called me to say that Reagan would like to hear my assessment of the European scene.

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### ■ "Nobody Has a Monopoly on Virtue"

*Rumors of Haig's appointment had already touched off intense controversy about his White House years. As Kissinger's aide on the National Security Council, Haig had requested FBI wiretaps on a number of reporters and Government officials in 1969-71 to determine the source of embarrassing leaks to the press. Later, as Richard Nixon's chief of staff when the Watergate scandal was approaching its climax, Haig resisted efforts by Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski to obtain Oval Office tapes that ultimately discredited Nixon. Critics also faulted Haig for having helped Nixon and Kissinger conduct the war in Viet Nam, including the 1970 incursion into Cambodia. Yet another cloud over his nomination was the persistent though contested allegation that the Nixon Administration ordered the CIA to organize the 1973 military coup d'état in*

*which Chile's Marxist President, Salvador Allende Gossens, was overthrown and killed.*

To my knowledge, never before my confirmation had there been hearings so openly conducted on ideological grounds rather than merely political ones. For some men there is a high emotive content in terms that apply to me: soldier, Republican, conservative, patriot. Add to that tinder the burning issues of Watergate, Viet Nam, Cambodia, wiretaps, the CIA, Chile, and you have the makings of a pretty hot time.

The question that ought to be asked of nominees for high office is this: Who are you and how did you become the person you are today? However, it was unlikely, as the date of my confirmation hearing before the Senate approached, that anyone was going to join me in a philosophical exercise on the relationship between personal experience and policymaking. The primary subject would be Nixon.

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### ■ My "Grab For Power"

For years, members of Reagan's staff had been communicating with their chief's friends and enemies through the press, rewarding the one and punishing the other. They had often communicated with each other in the same way. It seemed natural to them, now that they were in the White House, to communicate thus with other officials, and even with foreign governments.

At first, I did not realize that the media had let themselves be converted into White House bulletin boards. When I would deliver a sensitive memorandum for the President's eyes only in the early afternoon, and then hear quotations from it on the evening news, I would react with surprise and call up the White House to express my shock. How naive I must have seemed.

Since my meeting with Reagan on Jan. 6, we at State had been working with Defense, the NSC staff and CIA to produce a mutually agreeable version of NSDD1, the National Security Decision Di-

rective establishing the structure of foreign policy. State was awarded the chairmanship and Defense the vice chairmanship of all the interagency groups dealing with foreign policy. This arrangement was accepted without demur by Secretary of Defense Weinberger and by William Casey, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, and especially by Allen.

So it was with confidence, even camaraderie, that we four met at the White House after the Inauguration to deliver the agreed-upon document to the President, although we did not seek to see the President. A certain festivity was in the air and a certain solemnity too. We were living through the first hours of a new era, and if the heart of the Government is anywhere, it is in the White House. At the end of an Administration, it has an air of shabbiness, poignant to those who remember the paint when it was new and the furniture before it was battered. No one, I imagine, has left the place more threadbare than President Carter.

The draft directive was received by Meese in his office. Also present were Baker and Deaver. Meese seemed very much at ease, very sure of his authority. Baker and Deaver, favorites of Mrs. Reagan's, seemed to be lesser players, hanging back a bit. Allen was there, and so was Casey.

Also present was Weinberger. He is a capable man, immensely likable and honest, a talented administrator and a stubborn fighter for what he believes is right. The defense policy that he and President Reagan were to devise is a long-needed corrective and will heighten the chances of keeping the peace in small ways and large.

Under Meese's chairmanship, we began a point-by-point discussion of the document. With lawyerly meticulousness, Meese conducted a dogged critique of the paper. In the process, my earlier understandings with the President—and Weinberger's too—were disappearing in a haze of nitpicking. At length, Meese tucked the directive into his briefcase. I would like to be able to say that something in his manner warned me that the document would stay there, unsigned, for well over a year. But the truth is, I never dreamed that he would not hand it to the President at the start of the next day.

Once before, when the Cabinet-designates met in Washington on Jan. 7, I had sensed in Meese a tendency to assume an unusual measure of authority. In a sort of primer on Cabinet relations with the White House, he explained the President's ideas, the President's procedures, the President's priorities. Reagan himself spoke very little. When he did intervene, it was usually to recall an incident from his days as Governor of California that was in some way relevant to the subject.

As a result of Meese's pocketing the draft directive, there was no description of duty, no rules, no expression of the essential authority of the President to guide his subordinates in their task. This failure arose from ignorance: Reagan's assistants saw a routine act of government as a novel attempt to pre-empt power. In fact, it was a plan to share and coordinate those duties in foreign policy that express the President's powers under the Constitution. I left the White House that day with the feeling that Ed Meese and his colleagues perceived their rank in the Administration as being superior to that of any member of the Cabinet.

## “All I Hear Is Cuba, Cuba, Cuba!”

Signals were particularly necessary in Central America. It was typical that Americans would be reluctant to treat El Salvador as a strategic problem with global implications. Historically, we have been slow to think and act in these terms. It has cost us dearly. After World War II, an American Secretary of State declared that Korea was not within the U.S. sphere of interest. A short time later, North Korean troops attacked across the 38th parallel. A few months later, entering Seoul with elements of X Corps, I saw evidence of Soviet military presence down to the battalion level in the North Korean army.

A decade later, the war in Viet Nam should have taught us that such an expression of North Vietnamese imperialism could not have taken place without the massive support of the U.S.S.R. Yet we chose not to take the issue to the Soviet Union or even, in a meaningful way, to Hanoi. We chose, instead, to tangle ineffectually with the puppets, rather than the puppetmasters.

Central America offered another chance to show we had learned this lesson. The war in El Salvador seemed to be a stalemate. No stalemate could have existed without the massive support of outside sources. I believed that through economic, political and security measures we should persuade the Soviets and Cubans to put an end to Havana's bloody activities in the hemisphere and elsewhere in the world. In Central America there could not be the slightest doubt that Cuba was at once the source of supply and the catechist of the Salvadoran insurgency.

The insurgents said that they financed their war with the proceeds of bank robberies and ransoms paid by rich relatives of kidnaped members of the exploiting classes. Many accepted these explanations. The will to disbelieve our own governments is a very strong force in America and the West. We ran into this phenomenon when, in February 1981, we published a State Department White Paper called “Communist Interference in El Salvador.” The White Paper's critics brought in the Scottish verdict: not proven. Perhaps no defense of the paper would have been equal to the task of quieting the outrage. We had told impermissible truths.

To understand the circumstances of life in Central America is to wish to change those circumstances. No one could be unmoved by the spectacle of poverty and social injustice in a country like El Salvador. Merely by taking up arms against these conditions, the insurgents won a measure of idealistic international sympathy and trust. What the rebels had done in fact was to add murder, terrorism and inestimable sorrow to the miseries of the people.

The Reagan Administration was concerned with human rights. But publicly denouncing friends on questions of human rights while minimizing the abuse of those rights in the Soviet Union and other totalitarian countries was at an end. El Salvador, vital though the preservation of its democratic future is, represents a symptom of dangerous conditions in the Americas—Cuban adventurism, Soviet strategic ambition.

When I was a private citizen, President José López Portillo of Mexico had told me that the difficulty he had had in a domestic Mexican sense in dealing with the Carter Administration was that, in his words, “a President of Mexico cannot survive by taking positions to the right of the President of the U.S.”

Months later, as Secretary of State, I found myself seated next to the Mexican Ambassador to the U.S. at a dinner. He leaned over and made an offer. Would the new Administration like to open a discreet line of communication with the rebels in El Salvador? I exploded: no longer, I said, would Washington deal secretly with insurgents who were attempting to overthrow legal governments in the Western Hemisphere. In the next four years, the Americas would see a determined U.S. effort to stamp out Cuban-supported subversion.

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The Ambassador was at first startled by my vehemence, but he gripped my hand warmly. "For years," he said fervently, "I have been waiting for an American to speak words such as these. Tonight I will go home and sleep well!"

There was another envoy who needed to hear the message. This was the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoli Dobrynin. "It's good to see you back in Washington, Al," he said when he made his first call on me at the State Department. "You belong here." Coming quickly to the point, I raised with him the question of the transshipment of Soviet arms through Nicaragua to the insurgents in El Salvador. "All lies," said Dobrynin. "Photographs don't lie." I replied, for the U.S. had been

gathering intelligence on arms smuggling for a period of a year or more from human agents and by technological means like satellite photography. "The U.S. is profoundly disturbed by Cuban activities in the Caribbean and elsewhere in the world."

Dobrynin said this was certainly no way to start an Administration. How, he asked, should the U.S. and the Soviet Union begin to develop a dialogue? I said, "It is not acceptable to talk peace while acting differently. One statement we can never accept is [President Leonid] Brezhnev's insistence on your right to support so-called wars of liberation whenever and wherever targets of opportunity develop."

This was a flash point. Dobrynin said he could recall no such policy. It would be very unfortunate, he added, if the Soviet leadership formed the impression that the Reagan Administration was hostile to the U.S.S.R., because first impressions often persisted.

"Not hostile," I said. "Offended by Soviet excesses. Confident, determined, prepared to do what is necessary. The Soviet leadership must know that there must be change, for the future good of both sides." Then and subsequently, I stressed our concern with Cuba's role as a Soviet proxy.

Dobrynin complained, "All I ever hear from you is Cuba, Cuba, Cuba!" It is true that I raised that subject often. Cuban troops in Ethiopia were the praetorian guard of a regime whose policy had caused inestimable suffering. Cuban troops in Angola were the chief impediment to a settlement that might bring peace to that country and independence to neighboring Namibia. But it was the role of Cuba in the insurgency in El Salvador that engaged our attention in the most urgent manner.

There was not, however, a unity of views within the Administration over how to respond. Very nearly the first words spoken on the subject of Central America in the councils of the Reagan Administration made reference to the danger of "another Viet Nam." Indeed, this danger existed, if Reagan repeated the errors of the past and resorted to incrementalism. To start small, to show hesitation, to localize our response was to Vietnamize the situation. If it is easier to escalate step by small step, it is easier for an adversary to respond to each step with a response that is strong enough to compel yet another escalation on our part. That is the lesson of Viet Nam. If an objective is worth pursuing, then it must be pursued with enough resources to force the issue early.

The President was buffeted by the winds of opinion and

tugged by the advice of those who doubted the wisdom of a decisive policy based on the strategic considerations I have outlined. One camp favored a low-key treatment of El Salvador as a local problem and sought to cure it through limited military and economic aid, along with certain covert measures. In that camp were Vice President Bush, Defense Secretary Weinberger, Director of Central Intelligence Casey (with reservations), National Security Adviser Allen and most of the others. Together with Baker and Deaver, Meese was the leading voice for caution and slow decision. Meese's keen legal mind detected the risks; his deep loyalty and affection for the President made him protective.

Some of Reagan's highest aides counseled against diluting the impact of his domestic program with a foreign undertaking that would generate tremendous noise in the press and in Congress. Weinberger genuinely feared the creation of another unmanageable tropical war into which American troops and money would be poured with no result different from Viet Nam. The

Joint Chiefs of Staff, chastened by Viet Nam, in which our troops performed with admirable success but were declared to have been defeated, and by the steady decline of respect for the military—and the decline of military budgets—resisted a major commitment. I sensed, and understood, a doubt on the part of the military in the political will of the civilians at the top to follow through to the end on such a commitment.

I was virtually alone in the other camp, which favored giving military and economic aid to El Salvador while bringing the overwhelming economic strength and political influence of the U.S., together with the reality of its military power, to bear on Cuba in order to treat the problem at its source. In my view that the potential strategic gain from this combination of measures far outweighed the risks, and that the U.S. could contain any Soviet countermeasures, I was isolated.

Fortunately, the protracted nature of our discussions did not produce total paralysis. The aircraft carriers *Eisenhower* and *Kennedy* with their battle groups totaling some 30 ships were sent on routine Atlantic Fleet maneuvers in the waters around Cuba. An existing task force was upgraded to the status of Caribbean Command. Even these limited actions produced results.

Castro ordered antiaircraft guns placed on the roofs of Havana during our naval exercises. The flow of arms into Nicaragua and thence into El Salvador slackened, a signal from Havana and Moscow that they had received and understood the American message. From many sources we heard that the Cuban was nervous, that he desired contacts with the Americans.

In late February, one of Richard Allen's staff assistants, Roger Fontaine, took the unusual step of trying to arrange a meeting with Castro through Jack Anderson, the columnist. Anderson, it seems, knew a Cuban exile in Miami who claimed to have arranged for the passing of messages between the Castro regime and previous U.S. Administrations. Fontaine met the Cuban in Anderson's office. The question of opening a secret channel to Havana was discussed. The President's name was invoked.

When word of this reached me, I telephoned Meese, Allen's effective superior, to talk about its implications. We had spent weeks putting fear into the hearts of the Cubans and getting results. This diversion undermined the whole effort. Meese seemed to understand my objections. The President could not have been aware of this, he said; he had told Allen not to meet with foreigners without prior clearance from the State Department.

Castro's approaches became more frequent. Finally, it began to seem that nothing could be lost by testing the waters. On Nov. 23, the Cuban Vice President, Carlos Rafael Rodriguez, and I met in Mexico City, in strictest secrecy and with President Reagan's approval. Rodriguez seemed less a fearsome revolutionary than a cosmopolitan member of the privileged classes. Educated by the Jesuits, a Castroite from the first days, a trusted collaborator of the Soviet Union, he is probably the guarantee in human form that the Cuban revolution will outlive Castro.

The last thing Cuba wanted, Rodriguez said, was a confrontation with the U.S. The U.S. was mistaken, even irrational, to think that Cuba was involved in El Salvador. Cuba could not re-

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Soon Reagan called. In fact, he was able to explain the misunderstanding. He regarded the new arrangement as a mere housekeeping detail, a formality. Lack of communication, aggravated by staff mischief, was the root problem. I was convinced that Ed Meese had been as misled as the President. The trouble lay elsewhere in the President's staff.

Reagan said that he had received complaints from other Cabinet officers about "steamroller tactics" in connection with issues that interested me. Perhaps the President agreed with them.

"Do we have different conceptions of what your foreign policy should be, Mr. President?" I asked.

Reagan, exasperated, raised his voice. "Damn it, Al," he said, "we have the same views, and I need you!"

A few days later—at 2:35 p.m. on Monday, March 30—the State Department command center informed me that the television networks were reporting that a gunman had fired shots at

President Reagan as he left the Washington Hilton Hotel but that the President had escaped injury. I picked up a telephone connected to a direct White House line. James Baker told me that the first report was inaccurate. The President had been struck "in the back" by a bullet. "It looks quite serious," Baker said. "I'm going to the hospital."

Vice President Bush was in Texas. "I will move immediately to the White House," I said. Baker agreed. "You will be my point of contact."

In my car, my mind filled with memories of the day on which President Kennedy was assassinated and the sense of shock and sorrow that overcame the nation. Now the terrible blow had fallen again. On arrival at the White House, I learned that all the President's senior aides had rushed to the hospital. "Has the Vice President been informed?" I asked. The answer was no. Bush was airborne, flying from Dallas to Austin. I telephoned him on his plane and recommended he return to Washington at once.

To Allen, I suggested that the Secretary of Defense, the Attorney General and the director of Central Intelligence be asked to join Secretary of the Treasury Donald Regan, who was already present, Allen and me in the Situation Room.

Weinberger and Casey were the last to arrive. Each member of the crisis team in his turn gave the newcomers a report on his activities. Weinberger seemed somewhat self-conscious. Perhaps he was embarrassed by his late arrival. Abruptly, he said, "I have raised the alert status of our forces."

I was shocked. Any such change would be detected promptly by the Soviet Union. In response, the Russians might raise their own alert status, and that could cause a further escalation on our side. The news would exacerbate the existing climate of anxiety and anger and fear. Moreover,

the Soviet leaders might very well conclude that the U.S., in a flight of paranoia, believed that the U.S.S.R. was involved in the attempt to assassinate the President. Why would we alert our military forces if a lone psychotic had been responsible?

"Cap," I said, "what do you mean? Will you please tell us exactly what you've done." He had some difficulty specifying. This was natural enough: he had been Secretary of Defense for barely 70 days, hardly long enough to absorb the complete vocabulary of the job. I kept pressing him. He said he had ordered pilots of the Strategic Air Command to their bases.

"Then you've raised the Defcon [defense condition]." I said.

He disagreed. This raised the temperature of the conversation. I began to suspect that Weinberger did not know what he had done. He left the room to telephone in private. He was absent for perhaps ten minutes. When he returned, he told us, unequivocally, that he had not formally raised the alert status of our forces. He had merely sent a message to field commanders informing them officially of the situation in Washington. Most important, U.S. strategic forces remained in their normal defense condition.

A short time later, I turned my chair and craned to hear what the assistant White House press secretary, Larry Speakes, was saying on television. The room was hushed. It was oppressively hot. It appeared that Speakes had been waylaid by the press as he returned to the White House from the hospital, and he was fending off hard questions that reporters were hurling at him.

An official White House spokesman was being asked who was running the government at a time of national crisis, and he was responding that he did not know. He was being asked if the country was being defended, and he was saying that he did not know. This was no fault of Speakes'. He had not been part of our group. "This is very bad," Allen said. "We have to do something." "We've got to get him off," I said. Allen and I dashed out of the Situation Room and ran headlong up the narrow stairs. Then we hurried along the jigsaw passageways of the West Wing and into the press room. With Allen at my side, I made the following statement:

"I just wanted to touch on a few matters associated with today's tragedy. First, as you know, we are in close touch with the Vice President, who is returning to Washington. We have in the Situation Room all of the officials of the Cabinet who should be here at this time. We have informed our friends abroad of the situation. The President's condition, as we know it, is stable, [he is] now undergoing surgery. There are absolutely no alert measures that are necessary at this time that we're contemplating."

I then took questions and was asked, "Who is making the decisions for the government right now?"

My reply: "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. He has not done that. As of now, I am in control here, in the White House, pending return of the Vice President and in close touch with him. If something came up, I would check with him, of course."

On my return to the Situation Room, Weinberger expressed displeasure at my statement on the alert status of American forces. I was surprised. "Cap, are we or are we not on an increased alert status?" Instead of answering my question in direct fashion, he made some remarks that were less than relevant about the status of Soviet submarines off our coasts.

Weinberger added that Ed Meese had told him on the telephone that the Secretary of Defense was third in line of command after the President and Vice President. On defense matters, this was quite true, but the question was moot. The Vice President would be back in Washington in little more than two hours.

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My remark that I was "in control . . . pending return of the Vice President" was a statement of the fact that I was the senior Cabinet officer present. I was talking about the arrangements we had made in the Situation Room for the three- or four-hour period in which we awaited the return of the Vice President from Texas. Less precise, though in the same context, was my statement that "*constitutionally* . . . you have the President, the Vice President and the Secretary of State, in that order." I ought to have said "traditionally" or "administratively" instead of "constitutionally."

If, at the time, anyone had suggested to me that I believed that the Secretary of State was third in order of succession to the President, the press would have had the pleasure of even more vivid quotes. For many months, in this same house, I had lived hourly with the question of succession in case of the removal first of a Vice President and then of a President. I knew the Constitution by heart on this subject.\*

My appearance on the screen that night became a celebrated media happening. Edited versions were played and replayed many times in the days to come. Even if I wished to do so, it is now far too late to correct the impressions that it made, but I may be forgiven for saying that I regard the way in which the tape was edited, especially by CBS, as the height of technical artistry. The television camera is the siege machine of the 20th century. Perhaps the camera and microphone magnified the effects of my spring up the stairs. Possibly I should have washed my face or taken half a dozen deep breaths before going on camera. The fact is, I was not thinking about my appearance. I was wholly intent on correcting any impression of confusion and indecision that Speaker's words may have inadvertently created. Certainly I was guilty of a poor choice of words, and optimistic if I imagined that I would be forgiven the imprecision out of

respect for the tragedy of the occasion.

The "take charge" image had taken hold even before March 30. Only a few weeks before, my photograph (jaw jutting, arms akimbo) had been on the cover of *TIME* magazine. With the insouciant hyperbole for which that publication is famous, the caption read "Taking Command." Inside, under a bold line reading "The 'Vicar' Takes Charge," the editors devoted several pages of snare-drum prose to an account of my life and a description of the Reagan foreign policy. ABC reported: "The sight of Alexander Haig taking command on the cover of *TIME* magazine was more than some of the President's aides could take, and since its publication there have been several obvious White House putdowns . . . The problem seems to be that some of Mr. Reagan's closest advisers see Haig as a political competitor who must be reminded that while he may be vicar, he is not the Pope."

In days to follow, my vicarhood was recertified by "officials" and "presidential assistants" with more zeal than was perhaps good for it. When I departed two days later for a diplomatic tour of the Middle East, the White House, in an official statement, said that I was leaving "in the full colors of the Secretary of State and with the full confidence of the President." *TIME* described the issuance of the statement as an "extraordinary step."

So it was. Never had so many anonymous people been so eager to reassure the world in such an intensive way that I was not only competent. I was also quite "steady." But newsmen, canny skeptics that they are, were stimulated by all this reassurance to ask themselves, and their readers: If this fellow is *really* all right, why do they insist on telling us that he's all right? ■

\*The Presidential Succession Act of 1947, not the Constitution, specifies that after the Vice President, the presidency passes to the Speaker of the House, then to the president pro tempore of the Senate, then to the Secretary of State, then down through the Cabinet. It was according to this law that Speaker of the House Carl Albert was, for almost two months in 1973, in line to succeed Nixon after the resignation of Vice President Spiro Agnew. Nixon appointed Gerald Ford as Vice President under the terms of the 25th Amendment, ratified in 1967.

EXCERPTED