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2006-11-30-HAI
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Alexander M. Haig, Jr. Interview Transcription
30 November 2007

Timothy Naftali

General Haig, welcome to the Richard Nixon Presidential Library. This is our first oral history, and we will introduce ourselves and then we'll proceed in this order asking questions. And we look forward to your participation. Thank you, we appreciate it.

Alexander Haig

I'm delighted to be here, especially for an inaugural like this. I like that term.

Timothy Naftali

You like that term? John?

John Powers

I'm John Powers. I'm the supervisory archivist at the Nixon project, and I welcome you.

Alexander Haig

Good, thank you.

Douglas Brinkley

I'm Douglas Brinkley, director of the Theodore Roosevelt Center and professor of history at Tulane University in New Orleans.

Alexander Haig

I know the institution well.

Timothy Naftali

I'm Tim Naftali, the incoming director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library.

Paul Musgrave

And I'm Paul Musgrave. I'm Tim's assistant here at the Nixon materials project.

Alexander Haig

Very good.

Douglas Brinkley

Happy birthday, you're getting close.

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E.O. 13526
AUTHORITY: NLMS 2010-001
By: PMH, NARA; Date: 5/15/2012

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Alexander Haig

How did you know?

Douglas Brinkley

I've got your bio. December 2nd coming up.

Alexander Haig

It's very close.

Douglas Brinkley

Do you do anything --

Alexander Haig

I never thought I'd reach 39.

Douglas Brinkley

Do you do anything to mark your birthday? Are you going to do anything this year to celebrate?

Alexander Haig

Yes, I'm going to go from Florida to Washington for Christmas and see my grandchildren, so it's a happy time for me.

Douglas Brinkley

How many grandchildren do you have?

Alexander Haig

I have eight, seven of which are boys and one girl, and she's my favorite.

Douglas Brinkley

You were mentioning -- how many of your -- are any of your grandchildren in the military?

Alexander Haig

Yes, I have one that just finished Georgetown Law, had been recruited to be a lawyer for the Army and decided at the last minute he'd prefer to be a Ranger, Airborne Ranger Special Forces type, and that's what he's doing at Fort Benning, and I'll see him at Christmas.

Douglas Brinkley

Can I ask him --

Timothy Naftali

You want to go ahead?

Douglas Brinkley

When you -- tell me just a little bit about growing up and what made you want to go into the U.S. military. What were your influences as a young boy, and did you have any heroes? Were those heroes in the military?

Alexander Haig

Yeah, I think from the very beginning of a state of being serious, and that's long about seven years old, I guess, I felt that the military was going to be an extremely important part of the American society and appeared ahead because the clouds of the Cold War were just beginning to form up. And not only Nazi Germany, but I had a fixation at the time that Marxism was an evil ideology and that sooner or later that was going to be our real enemy. Little did I know it would reappear again in the waning years of my active life. So I always had that interest and I felt that -- my father died when I was quite young. I was nine. I felt I was going to have to do it on my own whatever it was going to be and that probably meant even an education. As it turned out, I did get a scholarship, partial scholarship to Notre Dame, because my representative who had given me an appointment to West Point was suddenly killed in an airplane crash and there I was without. And so I started at Notre Dame, and two years later I got an appointment to West Point.

Douglas Brinkley

Did you have a political upbringing in your household? Were people pro-Franklin Roosevelt, for example? Or what was the attitude towards --

Alexander Haig

Well, my father was a very successful Philadelphia lawyer who lived like most Philadelphia lawyers at that time. He spent the money before he got it. And when he died at the age of 38, 39 -- actually at death, he left my mother with three children, no insurance and a pretty sizable debt. And that was a rather stark thing. We were all in private schools. We lived in a beautiful home with servants, and suddenly the world got very stark and grim. And so I spent the rest of my life always scrambling for money so I could live up to the style to which I wanted to become accustomed. And that was really the beginning of my thoughts about West Point. Maybe it was economic determinism or it was my really strong feeling that the military was going to play an increasing role in our nation's affairs. As it turned out, they did, of course.

Douglas Brinkley

Did you have memories of Franklin Roosevelt at growing up? You would have been, what --

Alexander Haig

Well, my father was a staunch Philadelphia Republican, had been in World War I as a JAG, but was serving in the infantry but the war was over before he got deployed. But Franklin Roosevelt's name was a dirty word in our house. I can remember my father telling me two things. He said, "One, son, don't go into the military." And I said, "Why," because he had some Quaker teachings as a young man, although he wasn't a Quaker and went to the University of Pennsylvania and had a lot of concerns about the military. So he would have died twice if he had seen me go into West Point. And second, he said, "Don't be a politician." And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because it's filled with people that can't do anything else." And I'm not so sure that's not true.

Douglas Brinkley

You wouldn't have been 20 years old in 1944, right, with World War II going on. Were you following the war in the Pacific and following what was going in Europe, and did you have an inclination to look up to people like Nimitz or MacArthur or Eisenhower? Do you have any memories of thinking about those leaders?

Alexander Haig

Yeah, I had, I had my heroes, of course, and I did follow World War II in both theaters. And later, as a young officer, I got to work for Douglas MacArthur right in his office, and I talked to him every day. And so I had a chance to assess him very carefully, and with a young eye and untutored eye, he was the greatest military man I had ever met, and still remains that way. And a lot of my political upbringing came from his demise, which was totally untrue. I can remember telling Truman's daughter and her husband who came to me when they were writing his memoir that it was Douglas MacArthur who insisted that Truman land on Wake Island first so he could greet him as the pro counsel in Asia when he arrived. Well, that's nonsense. I packed MacArthur's bags. He was there the night before, before Truman ever came, because he wouldn't know what the word insubordination was. And you'll know in this recent diary just released, Truman asked Ike to come see him after he came back from Europe, and he said, "I want you to be president of the United States, and I'm going to not run in order to make room for you." And Ike was a little taken aback because he was probably a Republican by heritage and upbringing in that part of Kansas. And he said, "Well, what are you going to do about MacArthur?" And Truman's response was "I'm going to take care of MacArthur. You'll see what happens to MacArthur." And I happened to think that whole thing was political, like most things in Washington. And I've learned to only reinforce those sentiments as a result of my limited experience in Washington.

Douglas Brinkley

How did this, this young kid struggling in Philadelphia and then going to West Point get to suddenly be spending time with Douglas MacArthur and being that close? How did you get selected to work for MacArthur?

Alexander Haig

Well, I was a platoon leader in the First Cavalry Division, and I also played football for the division football team. Now, I don't know whether it was true or not, but MacArthur was a great fan of football. And next thing I know, I was asked to go up by a fellow I knew to serve as an aide and administrative assistant working between the chief of staff, Ned Almond, who I worked for every day and General MacArthur, and their offices were interconnected. And when the war started and I was the first one to receive that call from Ambassador Musheo [phonetic sp] in Seoul, and I was very skeptical because we had had a number of false alarms. And I say, "Are you sure?" And he said, "Yes, I'm sure," he said. And he was very descriptive about it, and so I called the chief of staff who called MacArthur. And in those days they used to be able to make cool decisions. And his answer was, this was about 11:00 in the morning, and he said, "Very well, assemble my staff. I will be in at 6:00 tonight and we'll make a decision." And I was there at 6:00 and straight through and went to the first telecom between President Truman and MacArthur at the outbreak of the Korean War. And I learned some lessons by listening to that which have historic connotation.

Timothy Naftali

What were the lessons?

Alexander Haig

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

What were the lessons?

Alexander Haig

Well, the lessons were that it was Truman, I think, as I recall, who said, "What are we going to do about Taiwan?" And MacArthur's sentiments were very pro-Taiwan, and he said, "Well, we'll have to do something to be sure that they're not engulfed in this conflict." I found that rather unusual because it was not China, the People's Republic of China, a brand new revolutionary government that was involved in the invasion but rather Moscow. They were the tutors, the logisticians, and they had advisors at every company level unit in the North Korean forces, and I know, I saw them firsthand, saw the pictures and photographs and the evidence later. But be that as it may, I thought, this is a mistake. And what the Chinese interpreted was that we were, when we crossed the 38th parallel a month later, that what we were really going to do was reinstall Chiang Kai-shek on the mainland and overthrow, and there was no contact whatsoever with it. So that lesson to me was always talk to friend and foe, but know who is friend and who is foe. We didn't do that, and I think it was a serious mistake by both leaders.

Douglas Brinkley

Were you ever intimidated by MacArthur?

Alexander Haig

I was always intimidated. I was in awe of him. I thought he was an unusually talented man. When he, when he spoke in normal conversation you could have printed it right then in any textbook, and it would not require a single re-draft. I know his speech at West Point was given extemporaneously, and it's one of the most magnificent speeches ever given. Luckily a cadet taped it; that's why we have a record of it. And he spoke totally extemporaneously. That was the man. He was a very impressive man. He had certain pride. Some people might even think bordered on the arrogant, but never would it be to defy an order from the president. Never would it be to be disloyal to a president. He was in uniform, and he knew our Constitution better than most.

Douglas Brinkley

Did you stay in touch with him? Did you have a relation with him after the Korean War or did you -- how long did you stay in touch with him for?

Alexander Haig

Well, I didn't stay particularly close to him because I went to Europe after that and after a brief tour at the service academies, both Naval Academy and West Point. And I did keep in touch with Mrs. MacArthur because he died shortly thereafter, as you know, and to her dying day we stayed in touch with her. She was another marvelous woman. She lived up in the, the hotel in New York City, Waldorf Towers, and I think a lot of that was supported by the family that owned the hotel, another fine family. They did that.

Douglass Brinkley

There was John F. Kennedy, I believe it was, got advice from MacArthur about --

Timothy Naftali

One question about MacArthur though, Dwight Eisenhower was no fan of MacArthur's.

Alexander Haig

And vice versa.

Timothy Naftali

What did MacArthur tell you about Dwight Eisenhower?

Alexander Haig

Well, I know Ike was quoted to have said he studied theatrics under MacArthur, and I think MacArthur said something along the lines that he was the finest clerk I ever had. That didn't, didn't sour the well on either of them as far as I was concerned. I think they were both magnificent men. I think MacArthur was a strategic thinker of -- at the level of George Patton, who was a tactical genius. Ike was a catalyst for what was just right for shape headquarters in World War II and that is, he could bring diversion, attitude and interest together and kneel them into a functioning unit. And I think he turned out to be one of the great presidents. And the more the scholars are researching him, and I

know the center of that has been up at Princeton University, they are concluding that he was probably among the very best of the American presidents, and that's because he ran an organized, policy-making apparatus.

Timothy Naftali

Well, to what extent when, when you were working with Henry Kissinger as his number two in the National Security Council, to what extent was the Nixon administration modeling itself on the decision making pattern of the Eisenhower administration?

Alexander Haig

Well, obviously Nixon had been two-term vice president so he knew the Eisenhower system well, and he believed it was a sound system. The National Security Council, which was formal, which had decision memos published after a decision was made so there would be no question about what was said and to avoid some of the pitfalls of the Johnson administration and the Kennedy administration, which were so informal that what would happen is they would have the meeting, the decision would be made and each Cabinet officer would go back to his department to try to prove how much influence he had with the president, so they put a little twist on it that coincided with their departmental view. And when you got out in the field, you were getting a cacophony of policy decisions. And that's when they created the so-called country team concept to try to straighten that out, if you recall, in the history book. And that included giving the ambassador authority to knock everybody's head together and take whatever was passed down by Dean Rusk or whoever the secretary of state was at the time as the gospel rather than the CIA view or the defense view or the USIA view. And that's one of the things that Nixon wanted to avoid like the plague. On the other hand, he was fearful of one of the pitfalls of that system. And that was the Army way of expecting your staff to come in and tell you, here's the solution, boss, and this is the way you better do it. In order to do that in a bureaucracy like the U.S. federal government, everybody scratches everybody's back so instead of getting a clear-cut philosophic decision you got a mishmash of compromise, a watered down philosophically vapid course of action. Now, I wouldn't say that I suffered from that too much, but that was the tendency that Nixon was trying to avoid, and Kissinger and he colluded to prevent that so we asked for options rather than a single recommendation so it would have some philosophic content and integrity. And frankly, it would have worked 100 percent of the time if we didn't have a Cabinet that was running its own little fiefdoms and frequently doing what they wanted rather than what the president ordered.

John Powers

General Haig, I was interested in talking, you worked as the military officer for Cy Vance and for Joe Califano.

Alexander Haig

That's right.

John Powers?

How did you come to work in the Nixon White House?

Alexander Haig

Well, Joe had some role in that and so did Bob McNamara because I worked for Bob McNamara as well. When Cy was deputy secretary of defense I was deputy special assistant to both.

And both of them spoke to Henry Kissinger about me. I was on an Army list that was submitted by the United States Army, but I don't think I was anywhere near the top of that list. I wasn't a Washington guy at that time, and I wasn't a European graduate. I was in the Far East. So I didn't have a lot of what I call political clout, which usually goes along with that kind of a recommendation. But there was a professor, an advisor at that time of the secretary of the Army and a chief of staff of the Army, a man named Fritz Kramer who was an expert on Europe, he was German born, and we became fast intellectual friends. When I worked on the Army staff and handled NATO and Europe and so we would meet regularly and I didn't know it but he was the guy that sort of brought Henry Kissinger into the world of America and helped to get him educated and into Harvard and from that point forward, so he also went to Kissinger and said, "This is the man you want to get." And when I was called down to the Pierre Hotel from -- I was acting -- I was dean of men at West Point at that time, a colonel, and back from Vietnam, getting my wounds nursed, and it was a great surprise to me that I was asked for. And the day I met with Henry was in the Pierre Hotel. He talked about Vietnam; he talked about the world at large. He was most interested in that I wasn't a military intellectual. That means to have all string of degrees. I did have a master's degree in foreign relations, but he wanted to know whether I was a combat officer and I said, "Just look at my record; make your own decision." And I think he concluded that I was because I had everything from purple hearts to distinguished service cross and many silver stars and air medals and distinguished fine clauses, so he was happy. And he hired me that day.

John Powers

Did you meet Nixon at that time?

Alexander Haig

No, I didn't meet Nixon because our conversation ran so long that Nixon went home that afternoon. I didn't get to see him. I did see him shortly thereafter. But he hired me that day and I left West Point, I think, within two or three days and went down to the Executive Office Building and started writing a paper on how we would keep the president informed. That meant all of the security apparatus of the government laced together to give him a daily report. And it exists to this day.

John Powers

You served as a battalion commander for the 26th infantry?

Alexander Haig

That's right.

John Powers

How did you -- did your view of the Vietnam War change before you went and while you were there?

Alexander Haig

No, as a matter of fact, before I went, I went from McNamara and Vance in the Pentagon where I was deputy special assistant, as you pointed out, to the Army War College, and there my paper was picked as the paper to be presented to the class in the graduation week. And in that I attacked what I call the strategy of incrementalism and it had to do with a devised Harvard import which said that when you get into a crisis with an adversary, never go in with preponderate force; always go in with a minimum force necessary to be just a little bit better than they were. It came from the Thomas Schelling school. And I assaulted that as the, the culprit in both the Korean War, which was a matter of force strategy because we had dismantled our World War II resources almost completely. You recall that, Louis Johnson [phonetic sp]. I write about that in one of my books and those experiences. I knew him working for MacArthur. But what it has is the exact opposite consequence. It guarantees escalation. If you go in with a, a minutia response, the other side is tempted to say, well, I could match that easily, and I'll do it. And they do it more dramatically. And that starts a chain reaction, which leads you into greater conflict rather than less.

John Powers

This is a great transition to talk about incrementalism on Nixon's 1969 Vietnam policy and the difference between Johnson and Nixon's first year strategy. And I'm interested in learning your opinions about Operation Duck Hook or "Pruning Knife" as the military called it for the dramatic escalation to try and bring about peace. Do you recall anything about those Vietnam contingency plans in July and September of 1969?

Alexander Haig

Yeah, I recall them very well, and I had nothing to do with them incidentally because at that juncture I was involved in intelligence and keeping the president informed every day of the world. But the other side of the NSC was, was working those papers and Mort Halperin and others were involved in that process. Mort Halperin was described by many as a left-wing liberal. I didn't find him that way at all. He was fairly tough-minded, and I know I worked after the EC-121 aircraft was shot down over international waters off the coast of North Korea, something we had been doing incidentally for 20 years, so it wasn't an accidental thing; it was a very calculated thing. And I had to then start shifting into the other fields of NSC. And as a matter of fact, by then Henry had pretty well made me his deputy, so I helped to reorganize the whole NSC after his first European trip and all the procedures that were followed henceforth.

Timothy Naftali

Can we ask -- can we probe a little more on the EC-121 story?

Alexander Haig

Right.

Timothy Naftali

In your memoirs, you tell a remarkable story about how the president made a decision and Secretary of Defense Mel Laird didn't follow through with it. Could you tell us a little bit about what you recall of the EC-121?

Alexander Haig

Well, sure, that is the most memorable side of -- most memorable side of it had to do with missing an opportunity to send a message to both Moscow and to the stooges of Moscow and Pyongyang was one of those at the time, that this was a serious administration that was not going to be taken for granted or a pursuer of incrementalism. And so I was put on the -- they had a hawk team and a dove team, and Halperin and I were put on the hawk team. I don't know why they picked what they thought were exact opposites to do that, but Henry did it in his genius. And another group, I think it was probably Winston Lord handled what I called the soft-line response, after shoot down. Now, we recommended immediate military action against the North by taking out one of their airfields, and at the same time, to tell Moscow that our toleration days were over. This included the determination to settle Vietnam immediately, with or without the Soviet Union and if the Soviet Union were to join the other side, we were prepared for that contingency as well. And that was what I thought was going to happen. But at the last minute the president decided to go the soft line, which was to do really nothing but conduct some bombings in Cambodia.

Timothy Naftali

When you said you thought it was going to happen, did the president actually say this was what he was going to do?

Alexander Haig

Pardon?

Timothy Naftali

When you say you thought it was going to happen, that the hard-line approach was winning the day.

Alexander Haig

Yes.

Timothy Naftali

Did you actually hear the president endorse it?

Alexander Haig

I thought he would. I thought he would endorse it, but he didn't. And I don't know where Henry stood on it. But I suspect he was on the soft line, that's my suspicion. You would have to ask him. But be that as it may, it was a lost opportunity, and in the later years when I was White House chief of staff, Nixon told me it was the worst mistake of his presidency not to respond then early on in a

decisive way to convince both Moscow and whoever else, Hanoi, Pyongyang or any one of the camp that this was a different America.

Timothy Naftali

What role did Secretary of Defense Laird play?

Alexander Haig

Well, now, as part of reacting to the initial attack, Nixon ordered, President Nixon ordered the movement of the Pacific fleet, the 7th fleet to the waters off of North Korea. Well, two days went past, three days went past and we got no signs of the movement of the fleet. So I called the assistant to Mel Laird and said, "What's happened to the fleet? The president wants to know where they are." He said, "Oh, I don't know about that, but you'll have to ask somebody else, don't ask me." Well, I knew I was getting a fancy-dancy answer. And the fleet actually never did go. Now, we suggested to the president that he shouldn't tolerate that, and the president did not like personal confrontation, and he was very fond of Mel Laird, and rightfully so. Mel Laird was a very competent, political individual. He came from the Hill. He was respected there. And I think Nixon knew he couldn't fire him and Bill Rogers, too, because they were both against doing anything aggressive, both of them. So nothing ever happened. And following that we were plagued with a number of crises, one in the Middle East, Yom Kippur War; one with the missiles implanted in Cienfuegos and a big step up in action in Vietnam.

Paul Musgrave

Were there other examples of times where the president's reluctance to force any personal confrontation led his subordinates to take advantage of him?

Alexander Haig

Well, yeah.

Paul Musgrave

Or to not carry out his orders?

Alexander Haig

And Henry was of the same ilk. He didn't like confrontation either. I guess big men don't, but a lot of big men have to. So I had -- if you say anything, I was a policeman between Bill Rogers, secretary of state, and Mel Laird in the White House. And believe it or not, that's how you remember the yeoman. That's why the yeoman was in the White House, because the president said, "I want to be sure that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff hears every decision I make. I can't count on the third floor of the Pentagon to pass it on." So we had a liaison officer sent over from Admiral Moorer, God bless his soul, who came over and became the yeoman's boss and the yeoman came to do his typing. And his mission was to tell the chairman every decision that was made at the time it was made and not to rely on a mixed signal from the third floor.

Douglas Brinkley

You called Henry Kissinger a genius, and you get a kind of twinkle whenever you mention Kissinger. What is it about Henry Kissinger that you found so --

Alexander Haig

You don't think there was something between us, I hope.

Douglas Brinkley

I don't know. What is, what is your -- what was the relationship with Kissinger? If you're the middleman in between Laird and Rogers, what is your relationship with Kissinger like at this time?

Alexander Haig

My relationship was very good with Kissinger. We seldom differed on a foreign policy issue. I think we came to our solutions through different routes, but we generally felt that we needed far more starch in our foreign affairs, the conduct of our foreign affairs in a war that was already beginning in a shooting phase, and it was a decision by Moscow not to get bogged down. They were failing economically and demographically at home. And I think they had decided that the best way to deal with the United States was through proxies and to back those proxies and if it became a matter of conflict between the two super powers, to back off. And he did it repeatedly during the Cold War, if you analyze all these crises that took place, whether it was the Middle East or Asia or wherever. And we could have won Vietnam. I have said that; I believe it. If we could have kept the bombing up, the Christmas bombing for as much as three or four more weeks I think we would have gotten an agreement from Hanoi to move back north of the 38th parallel -- the 17th parallel.

John Powers

I was interested in talking a bit about the Christmas bombing, that you took a very hard line on that that differed from both the president and Kissinger's. With a few different --

Alexander Haig

Oh, not the president's. The president was very much for it.

John Powers

Why don't you think he continued the bombing later?

Alexander Haig

Because he was threatened with impeachment. We had a couple of tough guys that were far senior to me. One was John Connally, who was constantly urging him to, to stand tall on these things and to take the kind of action that would get attention. And Henry, who was anything but a, but a liberal peacenik, he was anything but that. He was always at least speaking the tough law. And I think the president's own instincts were very much in sync with that. But when that bombing started, that was

very late in the game, you recall, very late. And there had been earlier bombing which -- the previous spring which were also quite effective. That's what brought the North back to the table.

John Powers

The May 8th bombing.

Alexander Haig

And then when we got there, something had happened. And it would be hard to say what, whether it was an upcoming election or a perception of Moscow, and of course it was all run out of Moscow. I have no doubt about that. Doesn't mean the others were stooges, they had their own interest also. But their logistician and their strategist was Moscow. And, you know, something happened and we got stonewalled in Paris when we thought we had every reason to expect some flexibility.

John Powers

And along those kind of lines, Henry comes back from the peace talks in mid-October of '72 --

Alexander Haig

Yeah.

John Powers

-- and says that peace is at hand. It's very close. What happened then between October of '72 and ultimately finally in January of '73 when they do sign?

Alexander Haig

Well, I think what happened was the bombing.

John Powers

But what was the --

Alexander Haig

That's why they signed it.

John Powers

What was the sticking point in October of '72 as to why they didn't sign?

Alexander Haig

A reassessment in Moscow that, that Vietnam was a quagmire for Nixon and that we were probably prepared to take something far less than what Henry was discussing at the table, and that was rather flexible, right at the edge of being acceptable or unacceptable. And very difficult to ever sell to President Ho Chi Minh and never was really. He never really did accept it. And he was right.

John Powers

General Haig, that's a great transition into talking about all of your trips to Saigon during this time frame to talk to General Xu. Could you care to tell us about those discussions?

Alexander Haig

Yes, as you know, there was a glitch out of Hanoi announcing Henry's visit, which he was allegedly bringing the outlines of this agreement arrived at in Paris. And it, it caused a real problem with Xu and so it was obvious that there was going to be no constructive dialogue between Kissinger and Xu ever again. And I had since indicated that I wanted to leave and I was scheduled to go back to the Army. It had something to do -- Vietnam had something to do with that decision on my part. I was, I was afraid that we were putting too much faith in what the American people and the American Congress and the American press would support if Hanoi violated the accord, and I told that to President Nixon. And he wrote a letter for me to take to Xu. And in that letter it assured him that if these provisions of the accords were violated, that we would resume the bombing of Hanoi. And it was made public. A lot of people have written who opposed the war and claimed that that was a secret codicil. It wasn't a secret codicil at all. The president announced it, that we would take action. And it also assumed that the Congress was going to continue to support Xu at the level we were supporting him in Vietnamization program. That's arms, equipment, training, money, all the things that were necessary. Well, no sooner did the ink dry on Xu's reluctant signature and the Paris Peace Accords get signed than we had a resolution come out of the Congress forbidding any bombing in Asia. So that's telling the enemy that you had no sanction. And I knew at the time Vietnam was lost. I knew it. And I told it to Henry, and he knew it. And it was done by one of the president's own people, whose name will remain unnamed but should be a lesson to all of us, right inside the administration that bombing halt was negotiated without my knowledge and I was --

John Powers

Why should it remain unnamed at this late juncture?

Alexander Haig

Just because and stuff, I mean, [unintelligible]. So be that as it may, then the immediate strangulation of all the aid started and by the time of the North Vietnamese attack, which was a year or two later, you recall, two years later, they had -- you didn't have grenades to throw or bullets to fire. That was the tragic end of Vietnam. Now, the real tragedy of it was, you remember we talked and I spoke today about the so-called domino theory. There was a domino theory, and it began to happen when Hanoi started to overrun Cambodia and was knocking at the door of the borders of Thailand. It was then that the Chinese told me as commander in NATO that they were going to have to punish Hanoi and to prevent the domino theory from becoming a reality. And they did, they attacked. That was in 1979. They lost 50,000 men in that attack because they were unprepared to conduct it. And the North was well-armed with Soviet weapons, advisors and a lot of other help. And they prevailed, the Chinese, out

of courage and what I call sacrifice. And what did our president do, who was then Jimmy Carter? Condemned them for aggression, holy mackerel. Can you believe it? That's what we did.

Douglas Brinkley

What part of the anti-war movement most -- bothered you the most that you felt was undermining Nixon's Vietnam policy? Were you watching all that domestic unrest? Was there an aspect of the anti-war movement that really got under your skin?

Alexander Haig

No, no, kids are kids. Most of it was done by kids and, you know, the government has a responsibility to, to support its policies but with the bully pulpit and somehow if you got the right course of action, it should be presentable. Unless you surpass what I call the threshold of Democratic society, that is that they run out of breath pretty soon in conflict. And in that process, you have to take some lessons about entering into conflict in the first place. One is, you must be sure that you prepare the grounds with the American people who are, after all, paying the price. Number two is that you go in with enough force that you make your case and do it quickly and get out. And that takes overwhelming strength, which we have been until very recently able to muster. I think it was Friedman who said recently, the trouble with this administration is that it likes to get into wars, but it doesn't like to provide the means with which to conduct them. And we went in there with two and a third divisions when George Bush, Sr., went into Iraq, for example, with the equivalent of 26 divisions. Now, how could you have such a discrepancy and be on sound ground.

Timothy Naftali

General Haig, part of President Nixon's approach to ending the Vietnam War and reducing international tension was to open the door to China. And in this morning's conversation you alluded to the fact that Henry Kissinger and you had your doubts about the opening to China strategy. Could you tell us something about that?

Alexander Haig

Well, we were both the product of our experiences.

Timothy Naftali

But do you remember --

Alexander Haig

Taiwan.

Timothy Naftali

When did you first hear -- when did you first hear that there was going to be an opening to China?

Alexander Haig

Well, this is very early, probably the second week of the administration. Henry came back from the Oval Office and said to me, "Al, this madman wants to normalize our relations with China." And he laughed. And I said, "Oh, my God." And I remember in my own case going home that night and thinking, hell, I was on the first American advisory group to go to Taiwan after the war broke out in Korea with my father-in-law who ran the Fox Commission and started the aid program for Taiwan. But I also was very skeptical that early about the need to talk to the Chinese who were already having their doubts about the Soviet Union, and were seeing increases in Soviet forces along their borders. And so even that early, that communication could have borne great fruit, but most of all, they had to know that we were fighting North Korea and the Soviet Union, not China.

Timothy Naftali

From you way you described this, though --

Alexander Haig

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

From the way you have described this anecdote it sounds as if Henry Kissinger was surprised. But hadn't Nixon -- hadn't Nixon already telegraphed his interest in a new policy in Asia even before he became president?

Alexander Haig

Well, he wrote an article some years before, I think.

Timothy Naftali

"Foreign Affairs."

Alexander Haig

Two years before, wasn't it, about the need to do it. But no, never -- all their discussions never touched on the China thing in the early day. It was everything was Vietnam and the Soviet Union. Always [unintelligible] sort of in the subject, if I may add. Now, in fairness to Henry and to myself, naturally, the more we thought about it, the more enthusiastic we became about the initiative. And today I remain enthusiastic about it if we don't let the neocons get us into a war with China, which they would like to do, as though they don't have their hands full already.

Douglas Brinkley

Where does this, this -- today you had -- I'd actually use the word anger towards the neocons. What's the origins of --

Alexander Haig

Not anger, frustration.

Douglas Brinkley

Well, frustration.

Alexander Haig

Frustration.

Douglas Brinkley

What's the beginning of your frustration with the neocon movement.

Alexander Haig

Wrong-headedness.

Douglas Brinkley

Where did it -- when did it start with Al Haig versus the neocons? When did that tension begin?

Alexander Haig

I was aware of this, this group -- first place, I knew the editor of the "Wall Street Journal," Bartlett, who was a neocon. I knew Albert Wohlstetter, who was the big bomb guy in the early days of the nuclear writings and was a neocon. I knew Richard Perle from his days with Scoop Jackson. He was a raging neocon and probably the intellectual giant of the group, not the educationally leader. They had a Yale professor who probably holds that role today and did then. They saw that the Democratic Party was going sharp left, and they didn't agree with that. So they during the Reagan administration joined the Republican Party.

John Powers

But weren't the neocons, the genesis of them, the '70s, weren't they also against the Nixon administration's SALT policies, vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in arms limitation treaty.

Alexander Haig

Well, I don't know about that because Richard Perle has had the most ambiguous recollections on that subject of anybody I know. You know, when I was, I was in NATO Europe when we were trying to modernize our theater nuclear forces and if anybody fought for modernized NATO nuclear forces, it was Al Haig. As a matter of fact, I did the same with Richard Nixon -- I mean, with Ronald Reagan when I was his secretary of state. Yet he's passing around that I was against the modernization of the theater nuclear forces. That's absolute insanity. It's totally untrue. Talk to Helmut Schmidt, talk to Helmut Kohl, they'll tell you where I stood on those things, including the neutron bomb, which cost Helmut Schmidt his job because President Carter undercut him. He got him to support it, then

withdrew it on the advice of his U.N. Ambassador. That's what happened. I know because I was right in the middle of it, and I finally got him to go on with the production of the bomb although he wouldn't deploy, and that's as far as he would go. So no, Henry Kissinger was not naive about the China thing. He just came as a bolt out of the blue that didn't sound Nixonian to him, I guess.

Paul Musgrave

You were one of the first people in the Nixon administration to visit China.

Alexander Haig

Please speak louder.

Paul Musgrave

You were one of the first people in the Nixon administration to visit China in advance of the president's trip. What was that like, especially for you as a Korea War veteran?

Alexander Haig

It was a very memorable experience. What I did was head up the advance party for the president's first trip there. Henry had already been there secretly, and I did the backroom work on that one, that trip to -- so-called trip to India and the real trip to Pakistan and Delhi belly and getting into Beijing. But Henry was sort of the substantive guy and I was the logistician, if you will. But I found out when I went that they decided in Chinese way that they were going to treat me just like they would treat the president, hold all the same banquets, all the same meetings, except with Mao. I did have the meetings with Zhou Enlai the first night I was there from almost 3:00 in the morning, from midnight until 3:00, after 13 mai tais [alcoholic beverage] imposed on me. So it was a very memorable experience and when I first went there he had the entire diplomatic corps assembled and all of the press in Beijing assembled. And he started out on a diatribe about the United States and Vietnam. And I said, "I didn't come here to be insulted. I'm taking my party back to the airport." And we started to leave. He emptied the room, and we sat down for three hours of very intense discussion.

Timothy Naftali

Did you talk about Korea with him?

Alexander Haig

Yes, I did, because I fought the Chinese in Korea, and I saw them stacked up like cordwood in front of our positions, and I knew what they suffered, and it was because they thought they were defending their homeland. And that was a diplomatic error of profound magnitude.

Timothy Naftali

But didn't, didn't some of MacArthur's -- didn't MacArthur unfortunately help create that impression that we were going to go into China?

Alexander Haig

Well, I don't think MacArthur would have had that impression. I mean, wouldn't have pursued that policy if Nixon -- or Truman had said no. Truman was in favor of that. You remember, that was a political issue, especially here on the West Coast where we had Senator Knowland who used to spend half his time pressuring the president on Taiwan and the other half consorting with the Taiwanese government. And he was a very powerful Senator, and there were a lot of others like him, as you know, and this was a, this was a Communist, anti-Communist dimension of American thought that persists till this day, sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly. I happen to think it's an evil system, but that doesn't mean the people are all evil.

Timothy Naftali

Do you remember what Zhou Enlai said to you about Korea?

Alexander Haig

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

What did Zhou Enlai say to you about Korea? What did this discussion produce?

Alexander Haig

Well, you know, I don't think any Chinamen would agree with what I interpreted. But what I interpreted in a very convoluted and very subtly presented advice to me was, you Americans better not lose in Vietnam and you shouldn't withdraw from Southeast Asia. That's the simplification of a very complex, rather lengthy discussion. But I don't think I was wrong in interpreting that. And I would say again today that there's a growing nervousness beginning to reappear in Beijing about the current Russian policies. Certainly I had no doubt about them, and I hope no American official has any doubt about this government in Moscow. It is our enemy. It is acting as our enemy in every venue in which we are interfacing today unless it's something in their long sought interest.

Douglas Brinkley

Has Putin been a disappointment to you? Has Putin been a disappointment to you? Did you have high hopes for --

Alexander Haig

No, I thought he was a KGB goon when he came in,
and I think he's a bigger one now that I have had a chance to witness him.

John Powers

I was interested in going back and talking about Nixon and the military. And there certainly appeared to be between the Pentagon and the White House a distrust or the Radford affair or this -- why, why do you think that Nixon distrusted the military or the military distrusted Nixon?

Alexander Haig

Oh, oh, oh, the president didn't mistrust the military. He mistrusted the civilian management structure that he had put in place above them. He was very, very pro-military. I mean, he was a Boy Scout, Richard Nixon, in every way, and he thought the military was the cream of the crop. I never had any doubt about that and never heard him say anything that would suggest otherwise. He also believed, however, in the tradition of Abraham Lincoln, that when the military makes mistakes, and they do, just like anybody else, you have got to move quickly and remove them. That he believed. In fact, he ordered me to take over Vietnam, and I said, "You're going to have to sleep on this because you have got the wrong guy. It's not our commander; it's his boss." And that was the secretary of defense that was causing the problem.

John Powers

Along those lines then, General Abrams in Vietnam, that there were -- and also General Ryan at the Air Force Chief of Staff, too, on the relationship at times certainly from listening to the tapes appeared to be sometimes tense and Nixon really trying to urge them to be bold and to be dynamic and to be decisive in Vietnam. Do you feel with what you have just said that it really it wasn't so much the military, it was, it was the civilian leaders that were watering down the orders?

Alexander Haig

Absolutely, you know, I made 14 trips during the Vietnam War to Southeast Asia and on every one of those trips, I think without exception, I sat down for hours with General Abrams, a man I loved and respected. He was one of our greatest soldiers. I watched him be diminished with each trip. And I was really fearful for him because I knew he was doing things he hated doing and had to do. A great example of that was the Laos incursion. I mean, Abrams didn't even leave his headquarters in Saigon. Fred Wyant [phonetic sp] who went up as his deputy was miles from the battlefield, no American forces supported that thing in the kind of way that the president thought they were going to support it. And they got chewed up and mauled and that set back Vietnamization years. No, General Abrams was a splendid commander. I never knew him to do anything wrong that he ever would on his on do and he was a brilliant, brilliant tactician. He was a brilliant commander in the second war, in the second war. He was George Patton's leading battalion. God, everybody worshipped Abe, myself included. So no, there was no tension. The president knew; he just hated confrontation. And I can understand that because every president that I have worked for, and I have worked for seven, four of them called me by my first name. They all hated to fire people. And I guess they thought it was either friendship, party obligations or whatever it may be. I know that Ronald Reagan used his attorney general to fire his household help because he couldn't do it himself. He hated it. And they're privileged to do what they want. They're, they're the boss, if it works. If it doesn't work then they have got to move.

Douglas Brinkley

How do you respond when you hear inter-popular culture people say the United States lost the Vietnam War?

Alexander Haig

I think we did. And we didn't have to.

Douglas Brinkley

Where were the -- why did we lose?

Alexander Haig

That doesn't mean I would have gone in it the way we did. I was there. I'm the only American that was there at the takeoff, participated in the combat and was there at the end. The only one, and it was through two parties. Believe me, the mistakes were political. And it had nothing to do with our ability to prevail. All we had to do at the beginning of that war before we got into it, when we were being challenged, was to start mobilizing, to start moving forces and I guarantee you the Soviet Union would not have permitted Hanoi to go on.

Douglas Brinkley

Which of the architects of our war policy, was it McNamara who you hold fundamentally responsible?

Alexander Haig

I worked for Bob McNamara. He was a very bright guy. I consider him a friend. I think he was caught up in incrementalism and the whiz kid that he brought in that took over the third floor with revolutionary ideas how they were going to be better than these dumb military professionals. Well, those dumb military professionals spend a lifetime studying war and history, and especially the mistakes of their predecessors over the years. And I'd be hard pressed to, to just knee-jerk a contempt for them, which I have seen in intellectual circles. I went up to this Harvard thing which described how -- they had President Jimmy Carter who wasn't even in the Vietnam conflict, didn't see it, didn't know it, the guest of honor to criticize the Republicans, and I can tell you, they said that Kennedy was going to get out of Vietnam. I sat there watching Kennedy build up, build up, build up till over 15,000 people who were flying all their air, close air support with sandbags in the back seats of the airplanes. That meant a non-pilot pilot from the South so they could claim that they were flying their own planes, and they weren't. So he wasn't going to get out. He was a fighter. He wasn't a quitter unless he could find a way around it cheap. Then he'd do it. Smart man would.

Douglas Brinkley

How do you explain to a parent who loses their son in Vietnam, one of the names on the wall, you know, well, we made political mistakes? Is that hard for a general like yourself to recognize the loss of life of those soldiers that maybe it was the political bungling cost soldiers' lives? Is that the hardest part of the Vietnam lesson to absorb?

Alexander Haig

No, I think the military had their share of misjudgments in Vietnam. But I think incrementalism and the failure to bring -- I used to say take it to the source. We never went to the source of the problem. The source of the problem was the Soviet Union. And that had to be a part of everything we did. Well, we did try to work with the Soviet Union but mostly by loving kisses and Détente, rather than the kind of cold turkey talk that they understand. And you delude yourself, what I call schmoozing, the then Soviet Union and I'd say you dilute yourself if you try it with Mr. Putin.

John Powers

I'm interested in exploring the discussion -- the comments you just made on Détente. Because what the Soviet Union's -- certainly the belief that Nixon was very successful in dealing with the Soviet Union.

Alexander Haig

Yes, he was.

John Powers

His assault on resolving the Berlin and coming to an agreement on Berlin, were we not successful with the Soviets in bringing about an end to the Vietnam War? Is that really -- was that an area that we --

Alexander Haig

Oh, they weren't helpful at all. They weren't helpful at all until we sunk a few of their ships and told them send some more if you'd like. They understood that.

John Powers

The first time that we began to mine the harbors was in May of '72.

Alexander Haig

That's right.

John Powers

And that was --

Alexander Haig

That was a one arm tied behind your back operation.

John Powers

Could you talk about that a little bit?

Alexander Haig

Well, that happened in the first real stalemate that Henry ran into in Paris. And he came back and he said, "We're going to have to do something." And there wasn't any question about it. They stuck their finger in our eye and they said, "There's not going to be any peace, we're going to win." Now, what happened was we started bombing the North, but it was very restrained. It was not the kind of bombing we did at Christmas. All military targets, incidentally, but we never went into the heart and soul of the heavy stuff.

John Powers

The dikes.

Alexander Haig

Huh?

John Powers

Or the dikes.

Alexander Haig

Oh, we never did the dikes really. They didn't make that much difference but could have if they had gone on a while. But we did sink some ships in the harbor in the second go around. And among them were Soviet ships.

Timothy Naftali

Intentionally or by accident?

Alexander Haig

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

Did we sink them intentionally or by accident?

Alexander Haig

No, they were in there. They were delivering goods. Nobody cared who they were. They were legitimate targets.

Timothy Naftali

But that's still, you know, the United States government was always very wary of sinking Soviet ships.

Alexander Haig

They shouldn't have been there. They knew we were going to -- we weren't going to tolerate what we -

Timothy Naftali

Had we signaled this --

Alexander Haig

You know, Henry shared everything with Bill Greenan [phonetic sp], even maybe more than I would have. I can remember Cienfuegos. You didn't ask about that.

Timothy Naftali

We're going to, yes, talk about that. That's a fantastic story.

Alexander Haig

Cienfuegos happened after this failure to respond to the EC shoot down and the weakness we showed, and next thing we know, we get the photographs of submarine pens and submarines in those pens being developed in Cienfuegos Harbor and these were nuclear capable subs. I mean, nuclear, not only nuclear propelled subs but nuclear delivered subs. And at that time Henry and the president were on their way to meet with de Gaulle, as I recall, and they called me on the phone when we had confirmation of this. I passed that on first and then I got the response. The president, Al, the president wants you to go to Dobrynin and give him a stark message that this is unacceptable. I went over to see Mr. Dobrynin in a darkened office and always the most cordial, brilliant fellow you ever laid your eyes on. He was a raconteur; he was everything. Had many years, 20 something years as ambassador to the United States. He knew all of us. Played us like a piano. You know, and I went in and I said, "We have proof that you are building submarine pens, and I have been instructed by the president to pass on a message to you that this is unacceptable." He said, "Are you threatening me?" I said, "No, I'm telling you that if you don't remove them we're going to remove them for you." He hit the table and said, "This is an insult." I said, "Thank you. I delivered my message; you better pass it on." And I left and I reported it to Henry. I thought he was going to fire me. "How dare you speak that way to the Soviets!" I said, "Henry, that's all they understand." You know, an old German Soviet marshal told me once, he said, "We don't care what you [unintelligible] capitalists say. We don't believe you till you spend your money, then we know you're serious." And that's something we ought to think about when we deal with Russia. They watch us. I think they thought I was serious because in 24 hours they started dismantling every one of those things and Henry didn't say another word.

John Powers

At the same time that Cienfuegos is going on, too, there are two other crises that Nixon talks about in his book, "The October Crisis." One was the election in Chile of Salvador Allende and the other, though, was in the Middle East and had to do with Jordan. And I was wondering if you had any knowledge of the Nixon's efforts to come to the aid of King Hussein and all of that.

Alexander Haig

I had a great deal to do with it. As you recall, Henry was out of the country most of that time so I was the interface with Rabin, who was the ambassador in Washington at the time, and I lived through every hour of that, every hour of it. I was, I was the point of contact. I was the Henry Kissinger in that crisis. I was a part of it.

John Powers

And how did you -- how did that operate? How did you work through this crisis?

Alexander Haig

Well, I got the call from our ambassador in a bunker in Amman Jordan when the uprising occurred. And then we had reports of the Syrian tanks on the border, manned by Syrians, driven by Syrians with a Soviet officer on the top of each tank until it got to the border, then they jumped off and the tanks went across. And at that point, Jordan's forces were very courageous and very professional. They are British tradition forces. And they're brave and they were disciplined, and they did very well in the initial stages of battle with the PLO and the insurgents that had been in place and ready to start this thing. But they were no match for the tank columns that came across the border. And I had just gotten home, midnight, when this news came in that they were beginning to buckle, Jordanian forces. Rabin and I were on the phone together that whole night. And I had to call the president and tell him that we have got to let the Israelis move here. And they did, by air. And destroyed most of those Syrian tanks, and that's what saved Jordan.

Douglas Brinkley

Do you ever worry that U.S. foreign policy is too closely tied to Israel?

Alexander Haig

Of course, always I worry about it. But I also worry about what is our real problem around the world today. It's a squandering of American credibility worldwide, and it's a product of 30 years of misjudgment, especially in the Middle East by presidents of both Republican and Democratic alike, both parties. I could go right down the list of 30 years.

John Powers

But Nixon was such a successful diplomat in the Middle East.

Alexander Haig

Oh, he was successful.

John Powers

In Egypt.

Alexander Haig

No, that's why I think he was one of our greatest foreign policy presidents. I think the history books are going to judge him far more favorably than contemporary news media driven histories. And also, remember, he who has the power writes the history. Well, he lost the power so he didn't write any history.

Timothy Naftali

Could we get back to the September crisis because when you were acting as Kissinger, it's very interesting in your book but reading your account of it, there are a few questions. Did, did you have authorization to order the COB aircraft to fly its command mission?

Alexander Haig

To do --

Timothy Naftali

The COB, the command mission.

Alexander Haig

The COBs?

Timothy Naftali

Yeah.

Alexander Haig

Did I have --

Timothy Naftali

How was -- was that a decision you made?

Alexander Haig

Yeah, I made that decision.

Timothy Naftali

I thought --

Alexander Haig

But I had talked to the president about the need to do it. And I don't know whether Henry was in Moscow or on his way back but, you know, the buck stopped with me.

Timothy Naftali

Well, I was going to say --

Alexander Haig

And I thought it sent a signal that was very important and it wasn't belligerent. We had every right to send a COB aircraft to Tel-Aviv any time we wanted, and did.

Timothy Naftali

Absolutely, but did you also order the stepping up of the alert status of U.S. ground forces and the placement of the 82nd Airborne Division on a six-hour alert?

Alexander Haig

In Europe.

Timothy Naftali

Yeah. To say that --

Alexander Haig

I conveyed it but never without the president's okay.

Timothy Naftali

No, I understand, but it was an interesting way of sending a signal to the Soviets.

Alexander Haig

Important way. As I say, if you don't spend the money, they don't believe you. And do you blame them with the way we promise and threaten and do nothing? We have had 30 years of that, American presidents.

Timothy Naftali

What was Kissinger's reaction to those signals?

Alexander Haig

I never asked him. He was happy because it came out very well.

Timothy Naftali

But because it's in the history of that crisis, Henry -- I mean, as you describe it, Kissinger doesn't play much of a role in that crisis. Big decisions are being made by the president through you.

Alexander Haig

Oh, no, no, no, no, Henry wasn't there. When he wasn't there, that's the way it had to be. I don't know whether Henry liked it or disliked it, but he sure knew it was happening. I don't think he would have spent 30 days at the Yom Kippur War if it hadn't been for the president. He wanted to go home every day. Brent Scowcroft was in my office pounding the desk, "We got to get Henry home." And I'd send the message back after talking to the president. "Stay there till hell freezes over."

Timothy Naftali

This is when he is negotiating. This is during the October [unintelligible]

Alexander Haig

That's what led to Camp David. Sure.

Douglas Brinkley

Do you think Jimmy Carter did a good job at Camp David? You're critical on Carter a lot. How was he --

Alexander Haig

I don't think Jimmy Carter did many good jobs at anything, to this very day. I mean, here's a fellow that overthrew the Shah of Iran. Now, he may not have known that he was doing it but everything he did had the practical consequences of doing that. He ordered me to order my deputy to go down to keep the troops in the barracks when law and order was breaking down and the moolas [phonetic sp] were taking over the capitol, and I refused to do it, and I said, "And I know what that means." So he then called my deputy, or had his secretary of defense call him and order him to go. Well, his career meant more to him than mine did to me because I quit and left NATO. That's -- you'll find within a week of that happening I went to Washington to be sure I knew what had really happened. Brzezinski was doing something to help the Shah. He won't admit it today probably, but he was, and thank God he was. Vance was on the other side of that issue and the president sided with Vance.

Timothy Naftali

Was that the origins of the Heiser mission?

Alexander Haig

Huh?

Timothy Naftali

The Heiser mission.

Alexander Haig

Heiser mission, sure. And Dutch Heiser was my deputy that ran UCOM [phonetic sp] day-to-day basis. I called him, I said, "Dutch, you're going to be confronted with a decision that you get probably once in a lifetime; that is whether you want to keep your career and do what's wrong or stand on principle. I've done the latter."

Douglas Brinkley

Were there any private moments with Nixon that you reflect back on where for -- obviously you are working together, did a friendship develop? Is there any stories of private Nixon, the real man behind the president that you can think of that you remember once in a while?

Alexander Haig

You know, all I can say about him, I've served seven presidents, four intimately close range. He was the most thoughtful, considerate and I think intelligent president of them all. He was the most serious about being president. He never stopped work. He never made a decision off the cuff or short -- took anguishing time to do it. He plumbed every source he could get for advice. And as a result he didn't make a lot of mistakes in foreign affairs. Domestic side he felt was better laissez-faire. The less the government tinkers, the better it will be. And there's a lot of truth in that but not always so he probably -- if he could be remade he would probably never have put price and wage controls in, which was the idea of John Connally.

John Powers

You left the White House in January of '73 to become vice chief of staff of the Army. Before returning to the White House in May what were your initial thoughts about the Watergate break-in?

Alexander Haig

Well, I didn't think it was anything but the kind of political mischief that went on regularly. And I mean, my God, I, I had seen enough in Washington to know that nobody was going to get the sainthood award for being president of the United States. Lyndon Johnson wouldn't have. I know the Kennedys wouldn't have because they lied to the American people about the Cuban Missile Crisis for years, even under sworn testimony, some of them. And no, you know, I expect politics to be politics. It's a dirty game but it doesn't mean that everybody has to be of that mold.

John Powers

So how did it come about that you became the chief of staff on May the 1st of '73?

Alexander Haig

Chief of Staff of the White House?

John Powers

Yes, sir.

Alexander Haig

It's a great mystery to me. I thought I died and went to heaven because I was back in the army and I loved the army. I still do. And I enjoyed it because not only was I vice chief of staff but Abrams was not confirmed because of the Cambodian hearings so I was boss. I never did anything without talking to Abe about it beforehand if it was of his, you know, authority level. But no, I was happy as a pig and I got a call -- well, I got a call a couple of times from Ron Ziegler. He said, "The president wants to know what you would do about this." I said, "God, I don't know, Ron, I'm not there and I'm not going to give off-the-cuff advice on something that I don't have a full sensitive grip on." But I went back to my wife and I said, "Now, why would he be asking me?" The next thing I know I was down at Fort Benning at a meeting. We were having a banquet after the meeting, and I got a tap on the shoulder that said, "The president would like to talk to you." So I went back into the back room and it wasn't the president, it was Bob Haldeman. He said, "Al, the president wants you to come over and replace Haldeman -- replace me and Ehrlichman." I said, "What?" He said he wants me to replace -- you to replace me and Ehrlichman. And I said, "That wouldn't be good for the president. It wouldn't be good for me." And he said, "No, I'm serious." He said he wanted -- he's standing right here. And I said, "Well, please ask him to think about this a little longer. I think it would be a mistake." And I went back and I was at dessert and I went back again. Then I could hear the president telling Haldeman, "You tell him that he'll have nothing to do with Watergate, this is temporary until we get somebody, but we have to keep things functioning, and we have to abide by your decision to resign." It wasn't his decision to resign. I thought a lot more of Haldeman, incidentally, than the American press did. He was, he was a man of some character. And he was not what he was portrayed to be, some kind of a fascist, not at all, not at all. He was selfless. I never saw him sit at a Cabinet table. I never saw him take a favorite seat in the helicopter like the Reagan gang. They had all the [unintelligible] being president of the United States, most of them. They sat at the Cabinet table. They -- out came their opinion. Nobody wanted to hear their opinions. They wanted to hear the president's opinion. That's what you want in a Cabinet meeting, not a staffer who is neither confirmed nor elected. So there's a legal violation there in my view when you pass total authority to someone who is not confirmed or elected.

Douglas Brinkley

How well did you know Gerald Ford? Now you're back in the White House. Had you known Ford through Washington circles, through Capitol Hill much?

Alexander Haig

I did know him, sure. I knew him because I had been in the Kennedy administration, the Johnson administration. I knew him and I respected him greatly and I still do. And people will never know what a courageous man he was. And he really was.

Douglas Brinkley

You mentioned a little bit ago about the body language that Zhou Enlai showed you kind of signaling without saying, and there's that famous meeting dealing with the pardoning of Nixon when you're

meeting Gerald Ford. Did you ever, ever signal to President Ford that look, you better -- you know, I have already talked to Nixon and I think some kind of pardon is going to be necessary?

Alexander Haig

No.

Douglas Brinkley

You know that big controversy over that moment.

Alexander Haig

Only, only from certain members of Ford's staff. You know, remember, anybody that worked -- you know, government is a power seeker's paradise and the higher you go the more ruthless the power seekers become, the higher you go. You don't get more purity and more selflessness; you get more cut-throatness. And it's insatiable. It's part of the Washington scene. And whoever is chief of staff is free game. I had it in the Nixon White House. I had it in spades in the Ford White House. Ford didn't know it. He begged me to stay on, and I didn't want to stay on but he made it possible for me to say no because I said, "If you stay on you have to give me hiring and firing privileges." And I was going to fire two of his favorite guys because they were inadequate to be in the White House of the United States of America, and they proved to be. Years later he put his arm around me and he said, "You know, Al, if I had listened to you I would still be president." So I tell you, you just have to know what a White House is. It's a den of friction and competition and ambition and when you get a good guy, oh, you're blessed, you really are.

Douglas Brinkley

That moment when you go in to see -- did Nixon ever pull -- I mean, the pardon's in the air. Did Nixon ever mention to you, look, geez, what's going to happen to me here? You're going to be left in the White House; I may have to leave. You're going to have to really help Gerald Ford?

Alexander Haig

No.

Douglas Brinkley

Have you been public about everything that occurred or is there some story you want to tell now?

Alexander Haig

Sure, everything, everything I ever did in those last hours I have written about in my book.

Douglas Brinkley

Right.

Alexander Haig

I didn't leave them with a hatred or a disappointment in Richard Nixon, precisely the opposite. You know, I lived through every agony he went through and his family went through. And it was a terrible drain on my own family. I wasn't used to losing. I hadn't lost too much up until then, but I lost him and the country lost him, and I think it was a result of domestic political excesses. Let me give you an example. Friday night I get a call from "Time" magazine. "General Haig, we have a story that President Nixon and Bebe Rebozo own the bridge from Nassau to Paradise Island and have been taking \$2 a car ever since." I said, "What? Where did you get that crazy story?" "We have it on absolutely unshakable ground." I said, "Well, you let me talk to the president and I'll give you an answer." Well, the president was on his way to Florida, and it took me two hours to get him. And when I got him, he said, "Where's Paradise Island?" I said, "In Nassau." He said, "Oh, I know that place where Huntington Hartford built something." I said, "That's the place." I said, "They say you own the bridge, you and Bebe, and you have been taking fares." "Dear God, Al, nothing could be farther from the truth. I never heard of such a thing." So I called them up right away. Oops, too late, we have gone to press. And they printed it. And they've never retracted it. Now, this is the kind of thing that went on every day of the week in that White House. And when I went over it was under the condition I wouldn't have to touch Watergate. I couldn't have walked in the door without being up to here in Watergate.

Timothy Naftali

Wait. There was -- who gave you this offer? Who promised you you wouldn't have to touch Watergate?

Alexander Haig

The president.

Timothy Naftali

He said you won't have to deal with Watergate again?

Alexander Haig

He said, "You will not deal with Watergate."

John Powers

Was that primarily --

Alexander Haig

And I got over there and he didn't even have a lawyer. He had Len Garment, who wasn't too well at the time and I don't think the president trusted him to be his lawyer and I don't think Len wanted to be his lawyer. But be that as it may, I said, "You got to get a lawyer." He said, "Who do you recommend?" I said, "Bennett Williams." He said, "He's a Democrat." I said, "Of course, he's a Democrat, that's why you ought to hire him. He's a lawyer first and a Democrat second because he's a