

Policy is at stake in the battle over Haig

by Kathleen Murphy

The battle over foreign policy which broke into the open in Washington last week has resulted in a significant setback for Secretary of State Alexander Haig. Although the latest reports from Washington indicate that Haig has managed to retain his post, at least for the near term, his powers and influence in the foreign policy arena have been sharply curbed, and he has suffered a "public humiliation," as the Western European press portrays it.

Haig, who boasted that he would be "the vicar" of U.S. foreign policy when he was sworn as secretary of state, has now been stripped of several vital functions.

- Vice-President Bush has been placed in charge of the administration's "crisis management" committee, a group charged with handling all major crises, ranging from a terrorist incident to an enemy attack. In January, Haig had tried to get the crisis management function—traditionally handled by the National Security Council staff in the White House—transferred to the State Department. On March 24, Haig told a congressional committee he opposed Reagan's proposal to put Bush in charge, but the White House announced a few hours later that the vice-president would take over the crisis management committee. The White House decision came after Haig had threatened to resign if Reagan went through with it.

- Deputy White House chief of staff Michael Deaver has been put in charge of planning for all the President's trips abroad, including his April 27 journey to Mexico, where he will hold substantive discussions with Mexican President López Portillo.

- White House chief of staff James Baker III and presidential counselor Edwin Meese will jointly take top-down responsibility for overseeing arms-control negotiations.

- Preparations for this summer's Ottawa summit, which will bring together the heads of state of the industrialized sector for crucial talks on interest-rate policy and other economic issues, have been taken away from the State Department and put under White House control. Reagan has assigned Bush overall responsibility for coordinating administration preparations for the summit. Like the vice-president's appointment to head the crisis-management structure, the Ottawa assignment is acknowledged by White House sources to be aimed not so much at bolstering Bush as countering Haig.

Cutting Haig down to size

These moves to rein Haig in climaxed a struggle that had been raging behind Washington doors for weeks. On Inauguration Day, Haig presented the President with a formal proposal whereby key aspects of international policy handled by Treasury, Energy, and other departments, as well as the crisis-management function, would be transferred wholesale to State. According to reliable sources, Haig's power grab "set off the alarm" among the inner core of Reagan loyalists in the White House—Baker, Meese, and Deaver. "They took one look at what Haig was trying to pull and it smelled too damn much of what Kissinger [Haig's mentor] did to Bill Rogers [Nixon's secretary of state, until Kissinger

forced him out—ed.] and Nixon. They knew they had to put their foot down.”

Haig proceeded in other ways to make foreign policy independent of the White House and the President. There were two areas in particular where Haig's actions finally forced the White House to publicly rebuke him, and led to his present reduced powers. These were President Reagan's trip to Canada in mid-March and the El Salvador war.

The controversy surrounding Reagan's meeting with Prime Minister Elliot Trudeau was the first public sign that tension between the White House and Haig had reached extreme levels. According to confirmed reports, State Department preparations for the trip were so poor and haphazard that Ed Meese was forced to organize an emergency team of the White House staff to work on the trip just a few days before the President was scheduled to depart for Ottawa. “Meese was furious at Haig,” says one source. “A lot of people find it hard to believe that the bungling was pure accident.”

Shortly thereafter, Meese took charge of all the President's trips abroad, placing his long-time associate and Reagan intimate Mike Deaver in day-to-day control. Deaver has already been in Mexico preparing for the Reagan-López Portillo meeting scheduled for late April, while Meese has requested policy memos from all cabinet departments. The new arrangement will permit other key departments, such as energy and agriculture, to have significant influence on foreign policy. With respect to the Mexican trip, they say, this will create a climate far more conducive to a positive alliance.

Former Democratic Party presidential contender Lyndon H. LaRouche and European leader Helga Zepp-LaRouche, returning from a highly productive trip to Mexico, arrived in Washington March 20 to hold a series of private meetings and public seminars on U.S.-European relations and the prospects for a U.S.-Mexican oil-for-technology arrangement. The concept, favored by the Mexican government and by many sectors of the American population, reportedly is circulating throughout the Reagan administration. Haig, however, opposes the idea. Also under consideration at the White House is a bill to create an open border between the U.S. and Mexico recently introduced by several prominent Republican senators, among them Reagan confidant Paul Laxalt of Nevada. The Good Neighbor Act, as its sponsors have dubbed it, would go a long way toward solving the illegal alien problem that has undermined U.S.-Mexican relations.

‘No’ to Haig’s geopolitics

Another major issue that provoked the White House crackdown on Haig is the El Salvador crisis. Shortly after taking over the State Department, Haig unilaterally decided to make El Salvador the number-one focus

of U.S. foreign policy and the “test” of future U.S.-Soviet relations. Without consulting the White House, Haig sent messages to the heads of Europe's governments. Next Lawrence Eagleburger, assistant secretary of state designee for European affairs claimed that the State Department had evidence proving that the Soviet bloc was funnelling arms into El Salvador.

Haig's attempts to pressure the allies into backing up his childish provocation of the Soviets were accompanied by his attempts to scuttle a summit between Reagan and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. Reportedly, Europe—particularly French President Giscard and West German Chancellor Schmidt—conveyed its dismay to the White House, which responded by placing Deputy Secretary of State William Clark in charge of an El Salvador task force. Clark served as chief of staff when Reagan was governor of California, and brought Ed Meese onto Reagan's Sacramento staff. In addition White House press spokesman James Brady pointedly announced that “the President is running foreign policy in this country, not the State Department,” when the question of El Salvador policy was raised at a White House briefing March 17.

The White House actions on El Salvador are particularly worth noting. Despite the clamorous insistence of the Eastern Establishment media that the fight between Haig and the White House is purely one of “turf,” there is ample evidence that major policy issues are at stake. Although we cannot report that the administration has carved out a foreign policy strategy different from Haig's, i.e., one that would truly represent the nationalist impulses that catapulted Reagan into the Oval Office, it is clear that the effects of Haig's policies, including Europe's response to the El Salvador caper, are being carefully weighed.

Another case in point is the grain embargo issue. Reagan campaigned in the farm belt on the promise to repeal the embargo, but Haig stepped in with his anti-communist rhetoric to keep the embargo in place. Reagan was left to contend with a lot of angry farmers, an increasingly tense relationship with the Soviet Union, and a not very happy Europe. In late March, the Republican-controlled Senate passed a resolution calling for the embargo to be lifted, and Sen. Robert Dole, whose wife Elizabeth holds a top White House post, lashed out at Haig for giving Reagan bad advice on the issue.

The point to be made is that President Reagan, his top White House advisers, and a number of his appointees are sensitive to the political ramifications of Haig's policies. They do not share the Global 2000 mentality that rules Haig's actions and dictates his policies. Whether their moves to cut Haig down to size are ultimately successful, though, will depend on whether they take the policy issue head-on.