
Crisis Management

Response to Haig's move for control

by Freyda Greenberg

An hour and forty-five minutes after the March 30 attempted assassination of President Reagan, Secretary of State Alexander Haig issued the following statement from the White House: "As of now, I am in control here in the White House, pending return of the Vice-President. . . . Constitutionally, gentlemen, you have the President, the Vice-President and the Secretary of State in that order." Mr. Haig's remarks, which contradicted both the U.S. Constitution and the established military command authority, drew the following fire from policy spokesmen in the U.S. and Europe:

- Columnist George F. Will, in a March 30 TV interview with "constitutionally illiterate" and "astonishingly insensitive politically."

- Radio Jerusalem said, "Haig was guilty of an ill-conceived act." The station had a constitutional law expert attest that "there is no basis for any of Haig's statements in the U.S. Constitution."

- The secretary of the Royal Institute for International Affairs, David Watt, asked whether Haig's role was related to an international plot, replied: "There is no conspiracy of any kind operating here. Haig disregarded the Constitution yesterday. He will pay dearly for that."

- Malcolm Rutherford of the London *Guardian* was asked the same question as Mr. Watt: "Those kind of theories are irrelevant to real life. The real issue here is the economy. [But] Haig is in trouble."

- The foreign affairs editor of the London *Observer*, Andrew Wilson, said: "Haig tried it again. He is really moving too fast. He made an interesting factual error on the succession question. This will be commented on adversely. . . . Serious thinkers here are making arrangements for the U.S. government if anything like this should happen again. I'm not sure how Bush would behave. He was not seriously tested during the campaign. We are not sure about him."

- A high-ranking U.S. military official in West Germany said: "In the opinion of myself and my friends, Haig pulled the trigger. His performance was disgusting. This is really too much."

- A banker in Düsseldorf, West Germany: "This all

comes as an extremely bad coincidence for Haig. The situation for Reagan is like what happened to JFK after Cuba. He changed his political stance, and he was killed."

- An executive at the Dresdner Bank in West Germany: "I surely hope Reagan will draw the right lesson on Haig. Haig's support in Europe is decreasing because of his off-the-wall speeches about the Soviet Union. If you want to talk like that you have to be prepared to put three divisions down in Red Square, or else you should shut up. Haig is a Kissinger remote-controlled robot in a three-piece suit!"

- The West German *Bildzeitung* reports that press secretary Jim Brady circulated a joke last week: "There is big excitement in heaven; the doctors think that St. Peter suffers from megalomania. God comes to the doctors and asks them, 'why do you think so?' The doctors reply: 'St. Peter thinks he is Alexander Haig!'"

Coming to Mr. Haig's defense in the U.S. were:

- Midge Decter, wife of *Commentary* magazine editor Norman Podhoretz, and affiliated with the Committee for a Free World, Coalition for a Democratic Majority, and Social Democrats U.S.A., who insisted that: "yesterday's incident was the result of the press gunning for him [Haig]. The mistake he made about the succession was very minor and unimportant. The incident last week was over territory, and absolutely not a disagreement on policy."

- A political analyst at the Heritage Foundation: "This whole affair is much ado about nothing by the press. It's a carryover from the week before. The Secretary of State is always traditionally number three. It's a question of order of authority, not of presidential succession. At best there have been misunderstandings between Haig and the White House. I have yet to see one issue of difference between them. The press is just blowing the whole thing out of proportion."

- A top analyst at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Affairs: "I'm not impressed by any discussion about Haig. There is no policy dispute between the State Department, the NSC, the President; just maybe divergences on presentation."

- A spokesman from the Brookings Institution: "There are no serious differences."

- A close associate of right-wing ideologue Richard Viguerie protested: "I think George Will was too hard on Haig. It is not at all clear that Haig is wrong."

- Henry Kissinger in a TV interview on March 31 declared that Haig acted appropriately under the circumstances.

At a Washington press briefing March 31, Reagan spokesmen James Baker and David Gergen stated that Haig "did one hell of a job." They also officially acknowledged the preceding day's dispute between Haig and Defense Secretary Weinberger.