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# Alexander Haig (1924-2010)

*The Life of a Warrior Diplomat*

*By Austin Knuppe*

On February 20, 2010, the United States lost one of history's great Cold Warriors. Alexander Haig—soldier in two major wars, servant to three U.S. presidents, and Supreme Allied Commander of NATO—exemplified the American ideal of the warrior-diplomat. Upon hearing the news of his death, U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton said that Haig had, "earned honor on the battlefield, the confidence of presidents and prime ministers, and the thanks of a grateful nation." The esteemed Ronald Reagan biographer, Lou Cannon, concurred, writing that Haig "was a patriot, a resolute warrior, an embattled diplomat, and an unsuccessful politician."

General Alexander Haig during his tenure at NATO

Alexander Meigs Haig Jr. was born to a staunch Irish Catholic family in a small suburb of Philadelphia in 1924. He suffered tragedy early in life when his father—a well-known Republican lawyer—died of cancer when Alexander was only ten years old. Haig's mother, Regina, insisted that her children receive a sound, Catholic education, so Haig spent the entirety of his childhood in parochial schools. When it was time for college, he departed for the Mecca of Irish-Catholic education—Notre Dame—before transferring to the United State Military Academy at West Point, graduating in 1947.

Haig began earning his stars as a warrior immediately upon graduating West Point. He left for Japan to serve on the staff of General Douglas McArthur. When the Korean War broke out, it was Haig's responsibility to brief McArthur on the strategic details of America's campaign on the Korean Peninsula. Throughout the war, Haig served in four military campaigns, earning two Silver Stars and a Bronze Star with Valor.

At the conclusion of the Korean War, Haig returned stateside to attend Columbia Business School. By 1955 he had earned a master's degree in business administration. He also managed to rack up an additional master's degree in international relations from Georgetown University before returning to service in the Pentagon as assistant to Secretary of the Army Stephen Ailes. At the start of Lyndon Johnson's first full term, Haig was promoted to work under Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.

When the war in Vietnam heated up in 1965, Lieutenant Colonel Haig took to the battlefield, commanding a battalion in the Army's 1st Infantry Division. During the Battle of Ap Gu in March 1967, Haig's forces were pinned by a sizable contingent of Viet Cong guerillas—they were outnumbered three to one. Haig travelled to the point of contact in a helicopter and the bird was immediately shot down. Two days later, he and his troops fought their way off of the battlefield. For Haig's valiant service, General Westmoreland awarded him the Distinguished Service Cross and promoted him to the rank of Colonel.

Alexander Haig (far right) meets with President Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and Vice President Gerald R. Ford

Colonel Haig's foray into the world of diplomacy began after the election of Richard Nixon. Nixon appointed Haig to serve as military assistant to National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger in 1969, and deputy national security advisor in 1970. One of Haig's most notable achievements as deputy national security advisor was the shaping of Vietnam's final cease-fire agreement in 1972. Haig reentered the military bureaucracy briefly when Nixon appointed him vice chief of staff of the Army.

When the news surfaced about Nixon's involvement in the break-in at the Watergate hotel, the president called Haig back to the Oval Office to serve as his chief of staff. Many believe that Haig helped keep the executive branch running when President Nixon was preoccupied by the unfolding drama of Watergate. It is also believed that Haig was a strong voice in influencing Nixon's decision to resign the presidency. When Nixon left office, Haig helped the new Ford administration with the hasty transition to power.

After President Ford settled into office, Haig went to serve as Supreme Allied Commander of NATO. Unfortunately, his appointment to such a high-profile office came with a cost. In June 1979, terrorists from the Red Army Faction launched a failed assassination attempt on Haig in Mons, Belgium. Later that year, Haig retired from a long and distinguished military career at the rank of four-star general.

Portrait of Alexander Haig

When Ronald Reagan was elected president, Haig was a natural choice to fill the office of secretary of state. Critics of the administration were vehemently against Haig because of his perceived role in Watergate. Despite such criticism, his appointment was confirmed in the Senate. Haig's career serving his second Republican president was short lived, and his increasingly hawkish impulses kept him in constant tension with the more moderate Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger. During Haig's tenure, he engaged in shuttle diplomacy between Argentina and Great Britain during the Falklands War, and to the Israeli government during their invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

While Haig reached some of the highest echelons of world power, the presidency was not in this Cold Warrior's grasp. Despite an ill-attempted run for the White House in 1988, the closet Haig ever came to the Oval Office was in the aftermath of the assassination attempt on President Ronald Reagan in 1981. "I'm in control here," proclaimed the secretary of state to the news media, misunderstanding the line of succession should Reagan die in office.

Alexander Haig retired from public service in the early 1990s, writing his memoirs titled Inner Circles: How America Changed The World. While his legacy is far from settled, it's fair to say that he was more at home on the battlefield than in the executive branch. The scars of Watergate and the internecine battles in Reagan's cabinet never left him. However, these political battles should not taint his over forty years of public service to our nation.

Lou Cannon concluded his reflections on the life of this warrior-diplomat with these wise words:

> *The New York Times obituary on Haig called him 'a rare American breed: a political general.' For better or for worse, however, the breed is common, beginning with our first president, George Washington, and continuing through Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, Douglas MacArthur Dwight D. Eisenhower and Colin Powell among others. Among this group, Haig stands with Grant and MacArthur as a superior soldier who failed to master the intricacies of civilian politics. He died a hero nonetheless.*

Rest in Peace, Mr. Haig.