

White House Interview Program

DATE: December 22, 1999

INTERVIEWEE: ALEXANDER M. HAIG, JR.

INTERVIEWER: Martha Kumar

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AH: Anything I tell you I'd be happy to see on the front page of the *New York Times*. They won't print it but I'd be happy—

MK: That's one of [Don] Rumsfeld's rules, right?

AH: It's not his; it's mine. He stole it from me. That's what I told the White House staff the first day I was there as Chief of Staff, during the Nixon presidency in 1972. I said to the staff: "I don't want anything in writing that you wouldn't be happy to see on the front page of *The New York Times*, because that's where you'll probably read it."

MK: How did you know that that was the way things work? That that seems to be an inevitable thing?

AH: There was an unusual hemorrhaging to the press during Watergate. Unfortunately, in addition to the disloyal, there were a lot of people also trying to impress the press with how much they were in-the-know. That's a tendency in every administration, but it really got out of hand during Watergate.

MK: Do you think people often will give information on the theory that it inoculates them to some extent in their relationships with reporters? Have people ever talked about that?

AH: Some do it that way. We've had a White House chief of staff, who will remain unnamed, who was the primary source during the Reagan administration, for almost everything. That was his style. Most of it was factually wrong but the press, having been given this information from a very high level, would write it as the gospel. And it wasn't right because it was always twisted to serve the purposes of the giver. That's what I call an individual utilizing his own position, or that of someone that he was supporting, to further his own agenda. On occasion, the press knows it's being used but assumes the role of accomplice, because it produces good print. However, once the rich resource is out of power, he or she becomes fair game.

MK: Would it be important, though, to try to explain to reporters—on a background basis—why policies came about, what the process was, and those kinds of things?

AH: Absolutely.

MK: Did you talk to reporters?

AH: Not often. Only when I was Deputy National Security Adviser and Henry Kissinger asked me to. When I was White House Chief of Staff, very seldom, unless the President asked me to. I did not like to talk to the press. I think there's too much of that going on. We have created a cottage industry in Washington in the staff's relationship with the White House press corps. These are not the professional journalists that usually are assigned to State or

Defense or the other Cabinet offices. These are political types who are going up the ladder of high notoriety and, hopefully, big bucks; not all of them, but a lot of them.

MK: Do you think the beat is a different kind of beat because it's a political beat—

AH: Yes, also it's totally news-oriented, totally headline-oriented, and highly political.

MK: —as opposed to Defense and State where you have—

AH: —usually, serious journalists.

MK: —substance that you're dealing with, whereas in a White House, so much of what you're doing is trying to move things politically that the kinds of people that come to a White House are people with a political specialty.

AH: That's absolutely right.

MK: When you came into the Chief of Staff position, what did you discuss with the President about what your job would be, what he expected and what did you expect from him?

AH: Well, I was appointed under very unusual circumstances. I really hadn't known Richard Nixon that well, except from the prism of national security—the Vietnam conflict, Russian relations, defense and arms control—all of the things that were associated with the work that Kissinger did as National Security Adviser. As Kissinger's deputy, I generally was cognizant of everything, and he traveled so much that the President got in the habit of dealing with me quite often, which Henry didn't like, but was nevertheless essential, and simply had to be.

Now, having said that, when I was called to take the Chief of Staff job and I had just managed to decouple myself from the White House—I wanted to get out of it almost from the day I was in it. In hindsight, as I look back, I think I learned a great deal and I'm glad to have had the experience. But I was a professional soldier and, at the time, I wanted to finish my career. Nevertheless, I was forced to retire, not because of law or due process but because of political exigencies. Roosevelt and Eisenhower both had professional military men as White House Chiefs of Staff and it was legitimized by executive order.

There were opposition leaders who couldn't do enough damage to Nixon. Every day, they woke up to ask, how could they damage him? There was more to it than just partisan hatred for Nixon; it was a classic struggle for power. If we had experienced a converging double impeachment of both Vice President [Spiro] Agnew and Nixon, the Democrats would have taken over the White House, without the vote, through the Speaker of the House, who was next in line, followed by the President pro tem of the Senate. There were some Democrats who were actually working for that outcome with the help of the *Washington Post* and the DNC [Democratic National Committee].

So this was what was really going on, and was the actual underpinning of Watergate that few recognized or write about, to this very day. It's similar to the fact that few will write that [Fidel] Castro probably killed John F. Kennedy, because President Kennedy was conducting a secret war against him through the CIA. Be that as it may, these are the truths that seldom surface in a contemporary sense. I've frequently said that, "He who has the power writes the history, and it takes maybe twenty or thirty years before scholars ultimately dig out the truth." They usually do, thank God, but that's the product of scholarship, not contemporary news reporting.

MK: It depends on what kinds of materials are left.

AH: Exactly. That's why what you're doing is important. But, you're dealing more in procedures, and less in substance. In the first place, Nixon hired me as Chief of Staff, with the guarantee that it would be temporary and I could get back to the Army. It was an awkward time, because the newly designated Chief of Staff of the Army had been under controversy. The designated chief, General Creighton Abrams, found his confirmation delayed because of the Cambodian operation during his time in Vietnam. Everybody in the Executive branch was free game. Even that wonderful professional, who was one of our great patriots, was singled out. It took a long time to get him confirmed, so, as Vice Chief of the Army, I was also Acting Chief of Staff of the Army; I was forced to do both jobs although I stayed in constant contact with General Abrams. He wasn't confirmed until a short time before President Nixon asked me to come back to the White House.

So I politely declined, following the first call by Bob Haldeman. Nevertheless, President Nixon insisted he wanted me for the job, but qualified the offer by saying it would be temporary and I wouldn't have to touch Watergate. My duties would be confined to keeping the government functioning. At the time, we had had ninety vacancies in key executive department positions, everything from Cabinet to agency heads. This had developed because, during the transition from his first to his second term, he asked his then Chief of Staff, H. R. Haldeman, to demand the resignation of every key appointee. Suddenly, Watergate exploded, interrupting the White House reorganization, and everything shuddered to a halt. Some would have been reappointed but they just didn't hear, so they left.

The government was run during that six-month period, from his inauguration until May, mostly by second-tier professionals, career bureaucrats if you will. They kept the government functioning. There were exceptions, of course, with some fine political appointees, such as Bill Simon, Bill Rogers, and others, who remained loyal to the President, and who had a strong sense of duty to the country.

So there was a tremendous rebuilding job that had to be done. But it was a rare person that you could go to in the private sector who would risk coming into the "Watergate White House." For example, attracting a new Secretary of the Treasury was literally impossible. I talked to a number of the nation's top financial leaders and economists. All turned the President down.

MK: How many people did you talk to?

AH: At least five, maybe seven. And I mean the cream of American finance, the top people, bank heads and experienced economic talent. That's how the late Bill Simon got the job. I ultimately had to ask him to move from where he was, serving as energy czar, to become Secretary of the Treasury. Some of those still serving just found they couldn't hang around any longer when Watergate exploded. When an official finds himself worrying more about himself or herself than their obligation to the American people, you're probably better off without them anyway. Be that as it may, we certainly had some of that.

MK: Did you have it because—maybe being tainted would be one thing—they felt that the energy was going to be in Nixon just trying to maintain himself, rather than push policy, and that policy was going to be on the back burner?

AH: Not really. As it turned out, the government ran pretty well, til the very end. Actually, presidential preoccupation forced by Watergate offered greater, not less, authority to the Cabinet and senior executives.

MK: What did they indicate?

AH: Most of them had some personal reasons. I don't want to suggest there was a mass exodus. Most of the vacancies were self-inflicted by the policy of demanding the resignation of senior officials. But I think that was a policy that was poorly handled. It should have been much more quietly done and not with the profile that caused appointees to have their pride damaged.

MK: Right. And much more selective.

AH: Yes. So the combination of those two things, plus the risks of Watergate, I would say were the primary problems. I don't know anyone that would accept the premise that we didn't get things done. The government ran. It wasn't until the final days of Watergate that the risk of what I call a frozen government were very high, because the legislature just simply refused to act.

For example, the Yom Kippur War of the fall of 1973 was probably the closest we ever came to a nuclear conflict. There was actually little chance of nuclear exchange during the Cuban Missile crisis, because the Russians only had a handful of missiles and they weren't any good. We had hundreds, and they knew that. But what was told to the American people was that we almost went to nuclear war. You recall that. That was untrue.

A far more dangerous situation existed during the Yom Kippur War, because by then the Soviets were approaching nuclear parity. The *Washington Post* carried stories suggesting the Yom Kippur crisis was a contrived crisis to prop up President Nixon. That's the kind of thing that makes you worry, because, during the Yom Kippur War, we actually alerted our nuclear forces, and the Russians had mobilized ground, air and missile forces to intervene, and they were actually in the process of doing so. They gave us an ultimatum and we were forced to respond by taking credible counter steps. But that crisis really got my attention from the standpoint of how dangerous Watergate had become. And I think it got President Nixon's attention as well.

MK: Do you think that they would not have moved if they hadn't sensed that the President was weak?

AH: No question. No question about it. They sensed a wounded president and that was one of the things that we had to be very conscious of in the conduct of foreign affairs. President Nixon knew what was going on. But as I said earlier, my charter was not to be involved in Watergate, but from the first day, I got involved. There was no way to separate Watergate from governance. You simply had to get involved, because the scandal permeated almost everything.

MK: No other game in town.

AH: Initially, the President didn't even have a lawyer. Here's a man facing impeachment without a defense lawyer. I tried to get him to hire [Edward] Bennett Williams, a top Democratic lawyer. I said what a smart Republican does is hire a smart Democratic lawyer, who is plugged in to the Democratic establishment. The President simply wouldn't do it.





























