



POLICY ROUNDTABLE:

Reconsidering Alexander Haig

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1. Leaders Who Fail: Reconsidering Al Haig

Evan D. McCormick and Alexandra T. Evans

“If you are looking for villains in Washington, there is Alexander Haig.”¹

–Stephen S. Rosenfeld, *Washington Post* Editorial Board, 1981

For most people, the only memorable thing about Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig was a gaffe. He had been in office for two months when, on March 30, 1981, President Ronald Reagan was shot by a would-be assassin and rushed into emergency surgery. With Vice President George H.W. Bush aboard Air Force Two, and the rest of the president’s aides gathered at the hospital, Haig strode out into the White House press room to reassure reporters that the federal government was still running. But when pressed to clarify who was making decisions, Haig mangled the order of succession. “I am in control here,” he declared.

Four decades later, the incident has become a metaphor for Haig’s tenure as secretary of state. Described by Richard Nixon as “the meanest, toughest, most ambitious son of a bitch I ever knew,” Haig made no secret of his desire for power.² He demanded that Reagan name him “vicar” of foreign policy and appeared, just two weeks before the assassination attempt, on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline “Taking

¹ Stephen S. Rosenfeld, “Weinberger in the Center Circle,” *Washington Post*, April 25, 1981.

² Michael R. Beschloss, *Presidential Courage: Brave Leaders and How They Changed America 1789–1989* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 282; and John Goshko, “‘Vicar’ Haig Takes Oath, Taps Policy Mainstream,” *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 1981,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/01/23/vicar-haig-takes-oath-taps-policy-mainstream/oddf316e-3942-4350-b5d8-7750420d9eb5/>.

Command” emblazoned across his chest.³ But his combative personality, flair for the dramatic, and penchant for behind-the-scenes machinations ultimately put him out of step with the rest of the administration. In June 1982, after only 18 months of service, he was replaced by George Shultz. In hindsight, Haig’s gaffe appears more ironic than Machiavellian. He may have wanted control, but he certainly didn’t know how to secure it.

For the most part, historians have not done much to complicate Haig’s image. Even as the Reagan administration’s foreign policies have received fresh attention from scholars in recent years, much of the focus remains on the administration’s latter years. Compared against the drama of Reagan’s second term, when the administration engaged with the Soviet Union to wind down the Cold War and grappled with the aftermath of the Iran-Contra scandal, the first 18 months of the presidency, when Haig occupied the seventh floor at Foggy Bottom, appear as little more than prelude. Unlike Shultz, who helped prompt Reagan to reduce Cold War tensions through major arms control agreements, it is difficult to credit Haig with any major foreign policy achievements. Where Haig’s role has been stressed — in the failed negotiations to forestall the Falklands War, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and U.S. interventions in Central America — it has been limited, to the most part, to regional studies with little sense of his historical significance beyond the event itself. If Haig saw himself as an embodiment of the “Great Man” theory of history, he has instead gone down as one of history’s also-rans.

Why, then, has the *Texas National Security Review* convened this roundtable on Haig’s legacy? The five essays gathered here do not attempt to rehabilitate Haig or to diminish the achievements of his successor. Instead, each examines Haig on his own terms, placing

³ “Week’s Cover,” *Time*, March 16, 1981, <http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19810316,00.html>.

him in the context of underexplored episodes and exploring the significant but stunted role the secretary of state played in shaping U.S. policies in Afghanistan, the Caribbean, Europe, and East Asia. In none of these areas was Haig's impact lasting or memorable, and each case offers insight into his faults as a statesman and as a strategist. But it is precisely this attempt to suspend the knowledge of Haig's ultimate failure and to focus on what he attempted to do that makes this roundtable important. Haig's middling legacy provides an opportunity for scholars and the public alike to reflect on the traditional question — energized by recent events — of whether individual agency or deeper structures drive history. Those who emphasize the importance of the individual tend to emphasize the rare figures like Shultz, who oversaw major moments of change or rupture. But these essays suggest that we can also learn from the banal figures whose tribulations force us to consider the interaction between personality, bureaucracy, and international circumstances. Though we are loath to admit it, the history of American foreign policy is littered with many more Al Haigs than George Shultzes.

Armed with new research, these scholars shine the spotlight on Haig and a series of specific and underappreciated policy episodes. By shifting our perspective on the Reagan years, two related themes emerge from the essays.

The first is that Haig was not fated to fail. Looking back at his tenure, many scholars have fixated on Haig's "outsider" status and his feuds with other administration officials. But when Reagan selected him in 1980, Haig was a strong choice for a Republican secretary of state. The youngest four-star general in Army history, his three-decade military career included service on Gen. Douglas MacArthur's staff in Japan, an appointment as vice chief of staff of the Army, and nearly five years as supreme allied commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. His policy experience was equally substantial, as Simon Miles notes in his essay. The same unconcealed ambition that complicated his tenure as a

cabinet member had earlier propelled him from a staff officer assignment to such prestigious appointments as deputy special assistant to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara (1964–1965), senior military adviser to then-National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger (1969–1970), deputy national security adviser to Nixon (1970–1972), and White House chief of staff under Nixon and, briefly, President Gerald Ford (1973). Haig then became supreme allied commander Europe, a position in which he demonstrated a deft ability to manage the trans-Atlantic relationship at a moment of transition for NATO. His ardent anti-communism, as Susan Colbourn establishes in her essay, placed Haig comfortably within the orientation of Reagan’s foreign policy team. Haig may have been a supercilious schemer, but in the late 1970s it would have been hard to imagine someone whose credentials for guiding U.S. foreign policy were better aligned with the bases of expertise then understood to be required of the secretary.

The second theme is Haig’s pragmatic approach to diplomacy. Despite his well-deserved reputation as an abrasive and occasionally egomaniacal leader, these essays reveal that Haig saw diplomatic engagement with the Soviet Union as an important means of expressing U.S. strength, and that he advocated for continuous engagement, even when a political settlement was unlikely. It was this predisposition, perhaps as much as any personality defect, that distinguished him at a time when Reagan and his other senior aides still tended to see diplomacy as an instrument that was secondary to brute military strength. Haig signaled his pragmatism early on, seeking to draw on his earlier expertise as a statesman to boost the role of the State Department in foreign policymaking (hence the “vicar” comment). He appointed or elevated experienced foreign policy hands like Walter Stoessel and Lawrence Eagleburger to key positions and empowered foreign service officers in regional bureaus, as in the case of Thomas Enders, his assistant

secretary of state for the Latin American Affairs Bureau.⁴ These decisions were maligned by conservatives in the White House. Even in Central America, where Reagan's ideological preferences dominated (and to be sure, Haig was a willing participant in escalating U.S. military involvement in El Salvador), Haig and Enders were the only officials who took steps to articulate a political solution and explored negotiations that would have tempered U.S. intervention in Central America.

This is the Haig that emerges from these essays: a figure whose credentials for and commitment to diplomacy, including his view that the State Department should be at the center of foreign policymaking, were discordant with the ideological and political context of Reagan's *first* term — but which also foreshadowed the turn in the president's foreign policy during his later years. Colbourn mines the Euro-missiles episode to illustrate Haig's relative pragmatism in managing the relationships with Atlantic allies compared to Weinberger's "zero option," which would have entailed a more confrontational approach to the Soviet Union, which (if it had failed) would have put European countries in a pinch. Likewise, Robert Rakove's essay on the administration's policy toward Afghanistan, which had been occupied by the Soviet Union since 1979, argues that Haig was uniquely committed to the possibility that "the Soviet Union could be negotiated out of Afghanistan."

But as the other two articles demonstrate, Haig's personal defects also prevented him from effectively implementing the diplomatic overtures he advocated for. In an essay on U.S.-Soviet relations, Miles shows how it was Haig's aggressive policymaking style, rather

⁴ See, for example, Daniel Southerland, "Haig Picks 'Old Pros' at State; Diplomats Cheer, Right Wing Boos," *Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 2, 1981; and Philip Taubman, "At the Pentagon and State Dept.: Pragmatic Tone," *New York Times*, March 2, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/03/02/us/at-the-pentagon-and-state-dept-pragmatic-tone.html>.

than the substance of his proposals, that stunted his efforts to encourage engagement with the Soviet Union. Even if his views on U.S objectives corresponded with the president's views, Haig's unwillingness or inability to adopt the administration's tone alienated him from the White House and prevented him from seizing opportunities when they arose. Similarly, Hideaki Kami's essay on Cuba shows how Haig's pragmatism didn't necessarily translate into moderation when applied within America's own sphere of influence. As a means of facing down the prospect of socialist subversion in Central America, Haig advocated belligerently for "going to the source" by threatening war with Cuba and took a hard line on Cuban migration. Both of these stances put him out of step with other Reagan officials who, despite sharing his distrust of Cuba, preferred to escalate the confrontation with revolutionaries in Central America instead.

Is this enough to suggest that Haig's standing in public memory is ready for revision? Probably not, our authors tell us. Even as new sources become available — notably Haig's papers at the Library of Congress and Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) volumes from the Reagan years — there is little to support a counterfactual in which Haig's fortunes turned out differently. But what each of these essays demonstrate is that, to the extent that Haig's gambits failed, it was not for lack of trying. His difficult personality made it harder for him to build the internal coalitions required to push his proposals forward or to achieve his aims abroad, but these were not the only factors behind his fall from grace. (After all, other notable diplomats have succeeded despite, and at times because of, their personal faults.⁵) Haig wanted to expand the role of negotiation in American foreign policy, but his ability to implement his vision was constrained by the Reagan administration's general disinterest in diplomacy at the time. It is difficult to

⁵ George Packer, *Our Man: Richard Holbrooke and the End of the American Century* (New York: Knopf, 2019).

imagine that another secretary of state, even one with greater charm and a better rapport with the president, could have achieved more in so little time. By revisiting one of history's least popular diplomats, we are reminded of how difficult it is for a single individual to turn the ship of statecraft.

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2. Caveats Aside:

Alexander Haig and the Continuum of Conservatives

Susan Colbourn

Asked to name the greatest or most consequential secretaries of state, few polled are likely to pick number 59, Alexander Meigs Haig. By nearly all preferred metrics, Haig wouldn't even make it onto most people's long shortlist. His time in the post was brief, lasting a mere 17 months, and his tenure rocky. He made waves in Washington. Haig famously styled himself the "vicar" and "general manager" of Ronald Reagan's foreign policy and vowed, in an unfortunate soundbite after the attempt on Reagan's life in March 1981, that he was "in control here."⁶ Chafing at slights — both real and perceived — to his position and influence, Haig threatened to resign repeatedly (though, seemingly certain that no one would take him up on his offer).⁷ Fed up with it all, Reagan finally broke down and said yes on June 24, 1982.

⁶ John M. Goshko, "'Vicar' Haig Takes Oath, Taps Policy Mainstream," *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 1981; Don Oberdorfer and Lee Lescaze, "Haig Loses Out in Dispute," *Washington Post*, March 25, 1981; "White House Staff Remarks in Press Room After Assassination Attempt," Mar. 30, 1981, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (RRL), Master Tape #34Bbcd, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGrwUEDAqSQ>; and Martin Schram and Michael Getler, "Haig's Actions Again Raise Concern Over His Conduct," *Washington Post*, April 1, 1981.

⁷ See, for some examples of Haig's threats to resign, Oberdorfer and Lescaze, "Haig Loses Out in Dispute." When Haig threatened to resign in June 1982, he reportedly shrugged off the idea that it would be accepted, telling William Safire that Henry Kissinger had resigned 30 times. William Safire, "Haig's Last Lunch," *New York Times*, June 28, 1982.

These antics make it easy to dismiss Haig and his short stint as secretary of state, reducing him to the punchline of a joke or a trivia tidbit. All too often, Haig's time at the State Department is treated as little more than a convenient illustration of the Reagan White House's dysfunction and personnel problems or as a tumultuous prelude to his much more successful successor, George P. Shultz.⁸

Though plagued by press leaks, personal squabbles, and fits of pique, there is more to Haig than we typically think. Haig's policy priorities and the limits of his power are undoubtedly a case study in how personality shapes policy and the policymaking process, but they also shed light on a deeper political struggle over the foreign policy soul of the early Reagan White House.

No shortage of histories, trying to make sense of the Reagan White House, sort the various foreign policy players into categories. There are both hard-liners and moderates, all vying for the president's attention. But it seems more accurate to describe the administration as one anonymous insider did: as a continuum. "There are no groups," just a spectrum of conservatives.

There is a continuum from purists to pragmatic conservatives, with one and the same person falling different places on different issues. The purists are Manichaeian in a medieval sense. They believe the Soviets are the devil, and that you can't bargain with the devil without losing your soul. The pragmatists take into account the world as it is.⁹

⁸ On recent trends in the historiography and the emergence of "Shultzology," see Andrea Chiampan, H-Diplo Article Review 1017, Feb. 10, 2021, <https://hdiplo.org/to/AR1017>.

⁹ Quoted in Leslie H. Gelb, "How Haig Is Recasting His Image," *New York Times*, May 31, 1981.

Haig is a perfect example. He defies neat classification. On some issues, he could be the consummate hardliner, almost outlandishly so. Michael Deaver, one of Reagan's closest associates, recounted an early meeting on Cuba, where, after someone made mention of Havana's subversive activities in the Caribbean, Haig interjected, "Give me the word and I'll make that island a fucking parking lot."¹⁰ Yet, on other questions, Haig championed positions that pitted him against the purists. In most of his legendary skirmishes with Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, few would have cast Weinberger as the moderate.¹¹

In the spirit of revisiting Haig's time at Foggy Bottom, what follows considers two aspects of the secretary's place within this continuum of conservatives. The first part challenges the still-prevalent view that Reagan's selection of Haig did not make sense. I suggest that Haig's appointment as secretary of state was instead remarkably consistent with the president's profoundly pessimistic worldview in 1980, and that it made all the more sense given the Reagan team's general disregard for their Democratic predecessors. The second part then turns to Haig's attitudes toward — and interagency battles over — trans-Atlantic relations to provide one illustration of how this continuum of conservatives operated during the Reagan administration's early years.

¹⁰ Quoted in Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Public Affairs, [1991] 2000), 163.

¹¹ Weinberger has also been on the receiving end of flat caricatures. For a recent effort to move beyond this caricature, see Ronald J. Granieri, "Beyond Cap the Foil: Caspar Weinberger and the Reagan-Era Defense Buildup," in *Reagan and the World: Leadership and National Security, 1981-1989*, ed. Bradley Lynn Coleman and Kyle Longley (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2017), 51-80.

Understanding Haig's Road to the State Department

At first glance, Al Haig was not an obvious choice for a top-level post in the Reagan White House. Unlike many who joined the ranks of the administration, occupying top cabinet posts and key political appointments, he was not a member of the president's old team from California. Nor was he a recent convert, brought in from his success on the campaign trail, like White House Chief of Staff James A. Baker III.¹²

Haig's background might have been unusual for the administration, but his appointment matched the broad messaging of the Reagan team throughout the 1980 campaign. Haig's basic outlook on foreign policy dovetailed neatly with that of the new administration in at least two pivotal ways. He had a visceral opposition to any and all things Carter, and he was extraordinarily pessimistic about America's position in the world.¹³

From his vantage point as NATO's supreme allied commander Europe, a post he took over in late 1974, Haig obsessed over the multitude and severity of the challenges plaguing the Western allies. These problems were, as he noted in a brief speech marking his appointment, as much internal as external. NATO's members struggled with inflation and recession, two adverse economic trends that ate away at the alliance's defense budgets even as the Soviet Union's military was growing ever more sophisticated.¹⁴

¹² On Baker's path to the Reagan White House, see Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *The Man Who Ran Washington: The Life and Times of James A. Baker III* (New York: Doubleday, 2020), esp. 129–40.

¹³ On the 1980 Reagan campaign and the role of pessimism in the administration's early foreign policy, see Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

¹⁴ Drew Middleton, "Haig Takes Over as Head of NATO," *New York Times*, Dec. 16, 1974.

Haig fretted about the rise of Soviet power in the 1970s. “Today,” he warned in 1977, “we are faced with a new and grievous threat to our security, an emerging Soviet imperialism.” He saw Cuban engagement in Africa as part and parcel of a Muscovite strategy “aimed at domination,” one that posed a direct threat to the Western alliance as a whole. To guard against that strategy, he urged his fellow citizens across the alliance to heed the lessons of history. “As history has taught, only the common purpose and collective determination of the West can deter this threatening adventurism.”¹⁵

Nor was Soviet adventurism in Africa the only indicator of Moscow’s growing strength and boldness. In another 1977 speech, delivered at the Economic Club of Detroit, Haig ran through a laundry list of problems facing the Western allies. NATO member governments struggled to make difficult choices about their security requirements in the face of what he termed “a socioeconomic crisis.” And leaders had a hard time figuring out how to balance continued defense spending with their diplomatic efforts to manage East-West relations. There were problems across the Southern Flank, from the political transition underway in Portugal to the continued animosity between Greece and Turkey, and waning confidence in Washington’s leadership. All of these problems occurred against a grim backdrop, what Haig bleakly summed up as “the relentless growth in sheer Soviet military capabilities.”¹⁶

Remarks like these made plain the general’s anxieties about the current correlation of forces and hinted at his dissatisfaction with the policies being pursued in Washington. And, if there was any doubt that Haig was unhappy, a torrent of newspaper articles all but

¹⁵ “This I Believe,” n.d. [1977], Library of Congress (LOC), Alexander Meigs Haig Papers (AMHP), Box 49, “Hans Apel” folder.

¹⁶ Alexander Haig remarks, Economic Club of Detroit, Feb. 3, 1977, LOC, AMHP, Box 71, “Project Memo File 1978 July - September” folder.

confirmed this speculation. He was frustrated by his own marginalization and sick of being blind-sided by the Carter administration. According to one anonymous source, “he was upset that decisions and ideas were being floated without consultation.” Rumors swirled that he planned to resign.¹⁷

Instead, Haig opted to air his grievances publicly. During an appearance at Columbia University, where he denied reports that he had threatened to resign, Haig underscored the importance of genuine consultation among the NATO allies. A seemingly benign assertion, to any contemporary who bothered to follow foreign policy it was easily understood as a critique of the Carter administration’s handling of the neutron bomb affair. Haig’s call for consultation came just weeks after the president deferred a final decision on the weapon’s production, much to the chagrin of just about every allied official, including a particularly peeved Helmut Schmidt.¹⁸

Haig’s habit of public griping was a questionable course of action, especially as he tried to get the Carter administration to telegraph his access and influence in Washington. At one meeting with Zbigniew Brzezinski in September 1977, Haig urged Carter’s national security adviser to make sure it looked like Haig was in the loop. The meeting’s minutes reported the general’s request: “It was necessary for his credibility to see, and be known to see, the President from time to time.”¹⁹ Haig’s regular complaints were not exactly a

¹⁷ Bernard Weinraub, “U.S. Aides Say Haig Threatened to Quit,” *New York Times*, April 25, 1978. The trans-Atlantic fallout from the neutron bomb is covered in Timothy Andrews Sayle, *Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 194–99.

¹⁸ Peter Kihss, “Haig Ready to Stay in NATO Post While He ‘Can Make Contribution,’” *New York Times*, April 26, 1978.

¹⁹ Haig, Brzezinski, and Treverton memorandum of conversation, Sept. 27, 1977, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library (JCL), Remote Access Capture (RAC), NLC-23-22-3-6-3.

secret in Carter's Washington. After Sen. Ed Muskie toured Europe in May 1979, Haig's behavior ranked among the most noteworthy elements of the trip. "Nothing significant to report except a remarkable lack of loyalty in Haig," Carter recorded in his diary after Muskie's debrief. "He takes every opportunity to castigate me and my administration."²⁰

By that point, Haig had already announced his plans to step down as supreme allied commander. Almost immediately after his January 1979 announcement, pundits wondered whether the general's impending retirement meant a run for the White House. "Will General Alexander M. Haig be marching through the snows of New Hampshire a year from now?," one *New York Times* column wondered.²¹ A few weeks later, after a bomb exploded, tossing Haig's car into the air, one reporter couldn't resist the temptation to ask about the retiring general's political plans, inquiring if the attack had anything to do with the popular rumors that Haig hoped to secure the Republican presidential nod. "I haven't found enough support for that suggestion to justify such a drastic course," Haig retorted dryly.²²

Over the course of 1979, Haig picked up the pace with a speaking tour, hitting cities and towns in some 40 states. At stop after stop, Haig's remarks returned to his earlier, pessimistic refrains in a well-rehearsed stump speech. Haig lamented America's "reduced credibility" in the world and insisted that it was time to meet that challenge head on. Washington, he exhorted audiences, must develop "a new kind of leadership" (presumably, what he had in mind was his) and challenge the Soviet Union's involvement

²⁰ Carter diary entry, May 16, 1979, in Jimmy Carter, *White House Diary* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010), 320.

²¹ Anthony Lewis, "Abroad At Home: 'You Just Can't Recall,'" *New York Times*, Jan. 8, 1979.

²² John Vinocur, "Gen. Haig Unhurt as Car Is Target of Bomb on Road to NATO Office," *New York Times*, June 26, 1979.

across the Third World, rather than ignore it in order to preserve some kind of détente.²³ The entire thing, one reporter noted, was “ominous, sobering, well organized and warmed up with anti-Carter Administration jokes.”²⁴

Haig’s outlook was not just unadulterated pessimism. During his farewell visit to the newly elected British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, in June 1979, Haig pointed to the promise and peril of the years ahead. “The period of the 1980s, and particularly the years between 1981 and 1987,” he argued, would be “of the greatest danger but also of the greatest promise for the West.” The 1980s, according to Haig, would be “the most crucial period since the end of the Second World War.”²⁵ He was right, as it turned out, though he wouldn’t be in power long enough to make the most of those transformations.

When Ronald Reagan’s decision to tap Haig as secretary of state became public knowledge, Jimmy Carter despaired. “This is a very serious mistake,” Carter confided in his diary, “for [Reagan] and for the country.”²⁶ Had Carter’s comments been public, however, they almost certainly would have won Haig accolades from his new colleagues. In an administration eager to be the anti-Carters, that disapproval could have been worn as a veritable badge of honor.

²³ Drew Middleton, “Haig Urges New U.S. Leadership Role,” *New York Times*, April 24, 1979.

²⁴ Ben A. Franklin, “Haig Assails Arms Pact and Hints at a 1980 Run,” *New York Times*, Aug. 5, 1979.

²⁵ “General Haig’s Farewell Call on the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street on 13 June 1979 at 1000,” June 13, 1979, TNA, PREM19/15.

²⁶ Carter diary entry, Dec. 17, 1980, *White House Diary*, 495.

Trans-Atlantic Battles

Haig came to the job eager to exert influence and impose discipline. In some signs of what was to come, during a transition period visit to the State Department for talks with the outgoing secretary of state, Muskie's presumed replacement "was not in a position to give a Reagan reaction" on a proposed F-15 enhancement package for Saudi Arabia, but he was zealous in his plans to overhaul the department. After meeting Muskie, Haig sent all of the non-career members of the departmental transition team packing. Their services were no longer needed.²⁷

Haig was no stranger to foreign policy. Though not the most conventional path to the top of the State Department, his tenure at NATO virtually ensured that he was familiar with many of the major issues of the day. His five years in his post there, spanning the Ford and Carter administrations, also made him a known commodity in the capitals of key U.S. allies. When Haig retired, the British permanent representative to NATO, Sir John Killick, informed his higher-ups that there was little doubt that Haig wished to be "a force in American politics" and could succeed in that quest. In the post of supreme allied commander, Killick thought Haig had been successful, with drive and imagination to boot. "He took immense trouble to cultivate individuals with whom he had to deal, and all the Allies, great or small, were left with the feeling that he understood their problems and was doing his best to help."²⁸ It was a skill Haig could turn to in his efforts to manage the alliance from Foggy Bottom.

²⁷ Muskie to Carter, Dec. 22, 1980, JCL, RAC, NLC-15-106-3-17-7.

²⁸ Killick to Carrington, "The Departure of General Alexander M Haig," July 27, 1979, The National Archives of the United Kingdom (TNA), FCO46/1947.

Killick's postmortem portrait of Haig's time at NATO captured the politically motivated side of the general, too. By Haig's final years, his disdain for the Carter administration was barely concealed. "He made little secret of his disagreements on specific issues," Killick recalled, "and indeed I feared at one time he was actively seeking a major issue of dispute as a pretext for a spectacular resignation." Haig's growing political profile as supreme allied commander put the European allies in a tight spot, as they desperately hoped to avoid being dragged into a public spat between the administration and the general.²⁹

When Haig took the helm at the State Department after a rocky confirmation process in early 1981, NATO members were fixated on one issue, in particular: the implementation of NATO's Dual-Track Decision. Adopted in December 1979, the alliance's (increasingly controversial) plans called for the deployment of new theater nuclear forces to Europe and the parallel pursuit of arms control agreements with the Soviet Union in the hopes of limiting these same systems.³⁰ Steeped in the decision's intricacies, Haig appreciated how politically fraught the issue was. It would be difficult to see the deployment of the Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles through, and to do so depended upon allied governments being able to hold the line, especially the five prospective basing countries: Belgium, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

When and how to negotiate with the Soviet Union was far from obvious, and the early days of the administration were filled with debates about whether or not talks even made

²⁹ Killick to Carrington, "The Departure of General Alexander M Haig," July 27, 1979, TNA, FCO46/1947.

³⁰ The origins of the Dual-Track Decision are well covered in Leopoldo Nuti, "The Origins of the 1979 Dual Track Decision - A Survey," in *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985*, ed. Leopoldo Nuti (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2009), 57-71.

sense. At one breakfast discussion in March 1981, Weinberger pointedly wondered what the agenda would be if the administration sat down for any talks with the Soviet Union on theater nuclear forces. “We should not really sit down to talk just for talk’s sake,” he maintained. “We should not talk unless we had a clear idea of what it was we wanted to talk about and it was clear we were not going to be giving something up just to engage in a dialogue.” Haig pushed back, warning that the administration could “get too heroic in dealing with our allies on this matter” and end up losing their (much-needed) support for the deployment track entirely.³¹

To shore up allied support for the deployment track, Weinberger and his associates at the Defense Department backed a bold proposal. What they envisioned was a variation on an arms control offer that had circulated since 1979: a so-called zero option where the United States would offer to cancel the deployments to Europe if the Soviet Union agreed to remove its comparable systems, including the worrisome SS-20s. When the National Security Council debated the U.S. negotiating position for what would soon be dubbed the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force, or INF, talks, Weinberger came out in favor of the dramatic initiative.³²

Weinberger’s support was motivated not by anti-nuclear altruism, but distrust of the Soviet Union — and of Washington’s allies in Europe. The zero option’s primary

³¹ “Memorandum for the Record,” March 26, 1981, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1981-1988*, vol. III, Soviet Union, January 1981-1983, doc. 36, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d36>.

³² The change in terminology from “theater nuclear forces” to “intermediate-range nuclear forces” reflected an appreciation of European (namely West German) security concerns — there was a dislike of the implications of the term theater. Susan Colbourn, *Euromissiles: The Nuclear Weapons that Nearly Destroyed NATO* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022), esp. 314, fn. 73.

advantage, in Weinberger's estimation, was to keep NATO allies on the straight and narrow. "If we adopt the 'zero option' approach, and the Soviets reject it after we have given it a good try," he remarked during the National Security Council's deliberations in October 1981, "this will leave the Europeans in a position where they would really have no alternative to modernization." Weinberger did not share Haig's sense, expressed earlier in the meeting, that "the Germans, Brits, Italians, and Belgians have all shown great courage," with Schmidt and Hans-Dietrich Genscher even threatening to resign if their coalition did not hold the line.³³

Haig hated the zero option. He disparaged it at a subsequent National Security Council meeting, describing the proposal as a transparent ploy designed to score easy points in the court of public opinion that could easily backfire. "Asking for the moon, for zero, could be turned against us and to our disadvantage," he counseled the president.³⁴ Haig's adherence to some basic principles of alliance management set him apart from Weinberger, who shared little of Haig's empathy for the domestic political constraints of their allies in Europe. "He thinks the allies are like the air traffic controllers," Shultz later remarked of Weinberger's attitude. "But we can't fire them. We need them."³⁵

Reagan came down on Weinberger's side, albeit for vastly different reasons. The zero option appealed to the president's loftier goals, including a peculiar brand of anti-nuclear

³³ "Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting," Oct. 13, 1981, *FRUS 1981-1988*, vol. III, doc. 92.

³⁴ National Security Council minutes, Nov. 12, 1981, RRL, Executive Secretariat-NSC Files, Meeting File, Box 14, "NSC #25" folder, also available at The Reagan Files, <https://www.thereaganfiles.com/document-collections/19811112-ns-25-minutes.pdf>. See, also, Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 229.

³⁵ George P. Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), 141.

sentiment. (Kenneth Adelman once described Reagan as the only “anti-nuclear hawk” he’d ever met.³⁶) Part of it was also a difference in negotiating tactics. “Al’s idea of leading with a flexible proposal had merit,” as Reagan later put it in his memoirs, “but I’d learned as a union negotiator that it’s never smart to show your hole card in advance.”³⁷ It took six years and the arrival of a particular negotiating partner in Moscow — it is hard to overstate just how much Mikhail Gorbachev mattered — but the zero option did come to fruition in December 1987.

Moving Beyond the Caricature

“He does not strike me as likely to run out of steam for the next ten or fifteen years - though he might blow up, whether in or out of a job,” Killick concluded after Haig stepped down as NATO’s supreme allied commander in the summer of 1979.³⁸ Haig’s short-lived tenure at Foggy Bottom seemed to fulfill Killick’s prediction, with its backbiting, press leaks, and resignation threats. The turf wars continued with Haig on the sidelines of the administration, most famously in his 1984 tell-all, *Caveat*. When the book appeared on shelves, one reviewer concluded that “Mr. Haig’s only real complaint over American foreign policy today is that he is not in charge of it.” If Haig read that particular review, it seems safe to assume that the author’s suggestion that the Reagan foreign policy of 1984 was “a Haig foreign policy” — with Shultz at the helm — would have been met with a mix of pride, disgust, and jealousy.³⁹

³⁶ Kenneth Adelman oral history interview, Sept. 30, 2003, Miller Center, Ronald Reagan Oral History Project, 38, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/kenneth-adelman-oral-history>.

³⁷ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 297.

³⁸ Killick to Carrington, “The Departure of General Alexander M Haig,” July 27, 1979, TNA, FCO46/1947.

³⁹ James Chance, “The Turbulent Tenure of Alexander Haig,” *New York Times*, April 22, 1984.

There is undoubtedly much more to be written about Al Haig, moving beyond the prevailing caricature. Haig offers a fascinating glimpse into the Reagan administration's political and policy struggles, as they tried to transform various strains of conservatism into a functioning foreign policy. Though seemingly an outsider in an administration filled with old California insiders, Haig hewed to the prevailing party line with its pessimistic outlook on America's place in the world. But he also came to the administration intimately familiar with the problems roiling NATO and, armed with that knowledge, consistently advocated for a careful and conscientious effort to manage the allies.⁴⁰ In making his case, Haig often ran up against a more unilateralist strand of thinking whose adherents believed that the administration could not — and certainly should not — let Washington's allies in Europe hold too much sway over U.S. foreign policy.

The twists and turns of interagency debate occasionally cast cabinet secretaries in strange and unexpected roles. Even Haig marveled at the Alice-in-Wonderland nature of political preferences within the Reagan White House, as he found himself to the left of nearly all the president's aides: "Imagine my being the 'liberal' in any administration!"⁴¹

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⁴⁰ Haig to Reagan, "Haig's Memorandum on U.S. Foreign Policy in 1982," Jan. 11, 1982, RRL, Richard Pipes Files, Box 12, "01/08/1982-01/25/1982" folder.

⁴¹ Leslie H. Gelb, "How Haig Is Recasting His Image," *New York Times*, May 31, 1981.

3. Alexander Haig's Paradoxical Legacy on Cuba

Hideaki Kami

In the middle of the Cold War, Alexander Haig stunned everyone with his ideas about how to deal with Cuba.⁴² Even for the Reagan administration, known for confronting revolutionary leftists in Central America and the Caribbean, the secretary of state's thinking on Cuba was striking. In his memoir, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger mockingly noted Haig's advocacy for a U.S. invasion to bring about "an end to the Castro regime."⁴³ First Lady Nancy Reagan also complained of Haig's militancy. "Once, talking about Cuba in a meeting of the National Security Council," she wrote in her memoir, "he turned to Ronnie and said, 'You just give me the word, and I'll turn that f— island into a parking lot.'"⁴⁴ Myles Frechette, the State Department's Cuba desk officer, called his former boss "irrational." When Frechette first heard of Haig's invasion idea, he set about working to dissuade everyone else in the State Department from supporting it. According to Frechette, however, Haig kept talking about invading Cuba right up until he resigned.⁴⁵

⁴² This piece is an abbreviated version of the discussion on Ronald Reagan's Cuban policy that first appeared in Hideaki Kami, *Diplomacy Meets Migration: US Relations with Cuba During the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chap. 5. This article narrows its focus on Alexander Haig and his role in the making of U.S. foreign policy. I would like to thank the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science for sponsoring my research through KAKENHI 17K18190 for years.

⁴³ Caspar W. Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 31.

⁴⁴ Nancy Reagan and William Novak, *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* (New York: Random House, 1989), 242.

⁴⁵ Myles Frechette, interview by author, Washington, D.C., July 28, 2014.

His obsession with military intervention in Cuba went nowhere. Nor did his many other initiatives. Shortly after the beginning of Reagan's presidency, Haig urged the president to abrogate the 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding, a product of the Cuban missile crisis. Haig believed that Kennedy's famous non-invasion pledge was no longer necessary in light of the spread of Soviet-Cuban influence in the region. To his disappointment, however, the U.S. president quickly shelved the proposal and denied the secretary of state any chance to justify his advocacy for using force. Determined to send back thousands of Cuban "excludables," who had entered the United States during the infamous Mariel boatlift but found themselves detained in American jails due to parole revocation, the U.S. secretary of state also ordered his subordinates to look into the possibility of a secret military operation for returning them to Cuba.⁴⁶ Again, nothing came of this because of the fear of provoking war. Reagan shared Haig's concern about Cuba, as well as his views about the country's influence in Central America and the Caribbean and the inconvenience of the indefinite detention of unwanted Cubans. Yet, the president never seriously considered invading Cuba, although his wife worried about the secretary of state's negative influence on her husband.

⁴⁶ Despite its special treatment of Cubans in general, the U.S. government considered specific groups of Cubans ineligible to stay, predominantly young and dark-skinned men who arrived during the Mariel boatlift. Some admitted or supposedly admitted to having committed felonies. Others found difficulty finding sponsors due to mental illnesses or criminal records. Joining them was a growing number of Cubans detained by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service due to crimes committed after their initial resettlement. The crimes might not be of the magnitude that would make these people excludable automatically. Once the Immigration and Naturalization Service revoked their parole, however, they supposedly had to leave the United States. For a sympathetic account, see, Mark S. Hamm, *The Abandoned Ones: The Imprisonment and Uprising of the Mariel Boat People* (Boston, MA, 1995).

All of these failed initiatives, however, did not necessarily mean that Haig was unimportant. By placing such extreme options on the table, Haig essentially helped to draw a line between what the U.S. government was willing to do during the Cold War and what it was not. This distinction shaped the course of U.S. foreign policy beyond Haig's time in office and long after the end of the Cold War.

The Origins of Haig's Isolation: Memories of the Past

From the very beginning, the Reagan administration identified Cuba as the source of the problem in Central America and the Caribbean, a region that it considered fundamental to U.S. national security. At the second National Security Council meeting during his first term in office, Reagan declared that "we must not let Central America become another Cuba."⁴⁷ Months later, he repeated this resolve: "I don't want to back down. I don't want to accept defeat."⁴⁸ Reagan's advisers agreed. His second national security adviser, William Clark, called the region "our front yard." Their concern was that the revolutionary turmoil in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala would make it impossible for the United States to project power globally. In their view, the chief instigators were Cuba and the Soviet Union.⁴⁹

And yet, despite the perceived gravity of the threat emanating from the Caribbean nation, Haig was the only one who proposed an invasion. His advocacy for armed confrontation with Cuba stood out inside the Reagan administration in part because of his unique

⁴⁷ Minutes, Feb. 11, 1981, 5, in folder "NSC 2," box 91282, Executive Secretariat, NSC: Meeting File (hereafter NSC-ES-MF), Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (RRL).

⁴⁸ Minutes, Nov. 10, 1981, 6, in folder "NSC 24," box 91283, Executive Secretariat, NSC-ES-MF, RRL.

⁴⁹ Minutes, Feb. 10, 1982, 1-2, in folder "NSC 40," box 91283, Executive Secretariat, NSC-ES-MF, RRL.

interpretation of the past. Consider his interpretation of the Korean and Vietnam Wars. According to what Haig wrote in his memoir, the United States could have won a clear-cut victory in each of these Cold War conflicts in Asia. Frustrated with the reality of limited war, he apparently came to believe that these wars should have been quick, decisive, and splendid. He was convinced that bold steps at the start of each war would have easily allowed America's military advantage to overwhelm its communist enemies.⁵⁰ Haig viewed the case of Central America in a similar way. "Only a determined show of American will and power," he noted, could stop the Soviet Union and Cuba from supporting wars of liberation in the Third World.⁵¹ "The United States would not stand by and permit the Cubans to draw us into another Vietnam," he declared at the first National Security Council meeting.⁵²

To Haig's disappointment, however, no one else in the administration agreed with this logic. When Weinberger expressed his disagreement with Haig over the proposed invasion of Cuba, the secretary of defense also referred to lessons from Vietnam. Yet, the lesson that Weinberger gleaned had to do with the importance of public opinion. However easy an invasion of Cuba might be, he told Haig, the administration should not begin a war if it cannot expect the public to support it.⁵³ Reagan sided with Weinberger. He did not want to commit U.S. forces to the region due to the lack of public support. "I knew that Americans would be just as reluctant to send their sons to fight in Central America," he wrote in his memoir, "and I had no intention of asking them to do that."⁵⁴ At a

⁵⁰ Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 118–23.

⁵¹ Haig, *Caveat*.

⁵² Comment by Haig in Minutes, Feb. 6, 1981, p. 3, in folder "NSC 1," box 91282, NSC-ES-MF, RRL.

⁵³ Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace*, 30–32.

⁵⁴ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: Ronald Reagan, The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 239.

National Security Council meeting, the president worried about being seen as a “warmonger.”⁵⁵

The lesson of the Vietnam War was not the only source of contention over the past and its implications for the present. Haig also held a unique view about what the United States should have learned from the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, one of the most dangerous moments in world history. To end the crisis, the U.S. and Soviet governments made a secret deal: Moscow would withdraw its nuclear weapons from Cuba in exchange for Washington’s pledge not to invade Cuba. The understanding, confirmed by Kennedy’s successors, defined U.S. policy options in Cuba for decades.⁵⁶ Early in Reagan’s presidency, Haig insisted that the understanding had lost much of its value. In his memo dated Jan. 26, 1981, Haig presented his revisionist view of the deal, claiming that “the original intent” of the 1962 understanding was “to prevent Cuba from becoming a threat to the security of the U.S. — and to countries friendly to us in the Hemisphere.” Based on this argument, he claimed that the Soviet Union had already violated the understanding by using Cuba as its “surrogate” to spread revolutionary ideas throughout Central America and the Caribbean.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Minutes, Feb. 10, 1982, 19, in folder “NSC 40,” box 91283, NSC-ES-MF, RRL.

⁵⁶ The non-invasion pledge received multiple reaffirmations in U.S.-Soviet communication, even though it was initially conditioned on Cuba’s acceptance of U.N. inspections, which never took place. The deal also included other matters, such as the U.S. withdrawal of missiles from Turkey. On the crisis, see, for example, Alexander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *“One Hell of a Gamble”: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964* (New York: Norton, 1997); Tomás Diez Acosta, *October 1962: The “Missile” Crisis as Seen from Cuba* (New York: Pathfinder, 2002); and Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

⁵⁷ Haig to Reagan, “Analysis of the 1962 U.S.-U.S.S.R. Understanding on Cuba,” Jan. 26, 1981, in folder “Cuba (01/04/1981-02/21/1981),” box 29, NSC: Executive Secretariat, Country File (NSC-ES-CF), RRL.

Haig insisted that Reagan convey this unilateral interpretation of the understanding to the Soviet Union and Cuba in a “clear and frank” manner and recommended that the president consider renouncing the understanding if the two powers breached it. Reagan did not want to take this path. “I believe the proposal is something we should talk about,” he mildly commented before ultimately opposing it. “Now that we have no Monroe Doctrine, I can see where we have a chance to lose a point by just canceling the agreement.”⁵⁸ Despite his public statement in favor of the Monroe Doctrine, Reagan was not as reckless as Haig. The U.S. president understood that such a pivotal security framework as the understanding was not something to play with lightly. Haig was never so sensitive. The president’s response simply disappointed Haig, who lamented in his memoir: “Reagan decided to abide strictly by the understandings.”⁵⁹

An Invasion of Cuba?

Despite his failure to persuade Reagan to break with the 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding, Haig continued to explore ways to invade Cuba. Because the Reagan administration identified Cuba as the source of the problem in Central America and the Caribbean, Haig had plenty of opportunities to advance his invasion idea. “If the Soviets move into Poland,” he said at one of the first National Security Council meetings on El Salvador, “we must get them somewhere else first, [and] that means Cuba.” No one else followed up, and at the end of the meeting, Reagan merely reiterated his intention of not allowing El Salvador to become “another Cuba.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Handwritten note on memo, Allen to Reagan, Jan. 30, 1981, in folder “Cuba (01/04/1981-02/21/1981),” box 29, NSC-ES-CF, RRL.

⁵⁹ Haig, *Caveat*, 98–99.

⁶⁰ Minutes, Feb. 11, 1981, in folder “NSC 2,” box 91282, NSC-ES-MF, RRL.

To Reagan's surprise, Haig continued to speak of an invasion, a naval blockade, or "an assault on Cuba" — both in private and in public. It seems likely that the secretary of state was trying to scare Havana and Moscow, but his frequent discussion of the topic backfired. The U.S. public grew anxious about Reagan's intentions and by March, Reagan's chief of staff James Baker, alarmed by poll results, persuaded the president to restrain Haig. Haig had no choice but to comply.⁶¹ At the end of the month, Haig's notorious comments following the assassination attempt on Reagan would further erode his reputation and his power inside the administration.⁶²

But Haig remained adamant. "I want to go after Cuba," Haig told Robert McFarlane, one of his subordinates. "I want you to get everyone together and give me a plan for doing it." McFarlane worked with Paul Wolfowitz and Richard Burt to evaluate the option of blockading Cuba. Their paper ended up opposing the move due to a familiar problem: lack of public support. The result angered Haig. "What you've given me is bureaucratic crap." The secretary of state ordered McFarlane to work with the CIA to propose "something that I can take to Reagan so that he can show a substantial gain during his first year in office." Haig stressed: "I want something solid, not some cookie-pushing piece of junk!"⁶³

⁶¹ Michael Grow, *U.S. Presidents and Latin American Interventions: Pursuing Regime Change in the Cold War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 130.

⁶² Haig held a press conference in the immediate aftermath of the incident. When asked who was in charge, he replied "I'm in control here." Reagan Library Educational Blog, "Who's in Charge? The 25th Amendment and the Attempted Assassination of President Reagan," Jan. 8, 2021, <https://reagan.blogs.archives.gov/2021/01/08/whos-in-charge-the-25th-amendment-and-president-reagans-assassination-attempt/>.

⁶³ Robert C. McFarlane with Zofia Smardz, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994), 177–81.

Another official who was witness to Haig's obsession with Cuba being the principal source of all problems in Latin America was his assistant secretary, Thomas Enders, who chaired the Restricted Interagency Group. The group, established to discuss the so-called "Going to the Source" agenda, consisted of five members: Enders, the chief for Latin American affairs on the National Security Council staff, the assistant director of the CIA for Latin American affairs, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, and an executive assistant for the chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁶⁴ Here too, the group found an invasion of Cuba to be too costly. According to Enders' aide, Charles Gillespie, members of the group received a classified RAND report and another from the Pentagon, both of which suggested that the envisioned military intervention in Cuba would result in thousands of U.S. casualties. "It was a choice between keeping things at a relatively low level or going all out," Gillespie recalled. "If we went all out, we were probably talking about [a] war in a true sense. It would have been much more than the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. It would be open warfare and U.S. troops on the ground." Enders reported to Haig that they discussed all options but found them unfeasible.⁶⁵

Haig continued to talk about an invasion, but without any support there was little he could do. Unwilling to attack Cuba, the Reagan administration focused instead on the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the guerillas in El Salvador, whom they saw as Cuban surrogates. Thus, Reagan's involvement in the Contra War in the following years was due largely to Haig's inability to garner support for invading Cuba.

⁶⁴ Gillespie, interview transcript, 236-37, 243, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Library of Congress (FAOH), Sept. 19, 1995.

⁶⁵Ibid.

A Time for New Migration Warfare?

The lack of will to mount an invasion did not mean that the Reagan administration took little action against Cuba. The administration tightened the pre-existing embargo (in place since 1960); harassed Cuban diplomats; made more complaints about Cuba to Soviet officials; urged U.S. allies to cut their economic ties with Cuba; and launched Radio Martí, a new radio station that could broadcast to the island in order to mount pressure on the regime.⁶⁶ Washington also engaged in psychological warfare, releasing false information in the hope of making Castro nervous about Reagan's intentions. The basic assumption of these measures was that the administration could intimidate Castro and force him to divert his resources away from Central America and the Caribbean. But in retrospect, the Reagan administration could not do as much as it promised. The administration did not even close the U.S. interests section in Havana, which its predecessor had opened in an attempt to normalize U.S.-Cuban diplomatic relations. "Their policy was little more than Carter's," said Frechette. "They just wanted to sound tough."⁶⁷

In the end, it was Castro who was better able to influence Reagan, Haig, and the rest of the administration. The Mariel boatlift of 1980, one of the most controversial immigration crises in the nation's history, occurred just months before the start of Reagan's presidency. From April to September 1980, a total of 125,000 Cubans chaotically entered the United States. With the economic and political burden multiplied by the sheer number of migrants and the massive scale of administrative confusion, public support for Carter evaporated.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ For details, see Kami, *Diplomacy Meets Migration*, chap. 5.

⁶⁷ Frechette, interview with author, July 28, 2014.

⁶⁸ On the Mariel crisis, see, Kami, *Diplomacy Meets Migration*, chap. 4.

Reagan did not want to see another Mariel, and all of his advisers, including Haig, agreed. John Bushnell, Haig's deputy assistant secretary, warned that "the ace Castro always had up his sleeve was sending lots of Cubans to the U.S. as boat people."⁶⁹ To avoid another mass migration crisis, the administration developed a contingency plan at Reagan's urging, although it was not a perfect solution. The specter of another Mariel would haunt every successive U.S. administration.⁷⁰

Another problem of crucial importance for Reagan was the status of thousands of Mariel Cubans whom the administration found ineligible to stay in the United States for various reasons. These so-called "excludables" remained in U.S. jails at the expense of American taxpayers with no real prospect of being returned to Cuba. On May 18, 1981, when Reagan received his immigration task force report from his attorney general, he wrote in his diary: "Our 1st problem is what to do with 1,000s of Cubans—criminals and the insane that Castro loaded on refugee boats and sent here." In his diary, the U.S. president repeatedly referred to this issue as if it were the most important, both with regard to immigration policy and U.S. relations with Cuba.⁷¹

The Mariel "excludables" consisted of three groups. The first group included those who admitted or supposedly admitted to having committed a felony. The second group was made up of people whom the U.S. government found "very hard" to resettle into U.S. society due to mental illness or criminal records. (Sensational reports of Mariel-related

⁶⁹ Bushnell, interview transcript, 460, FAOH, Dec. 19, 1997.

⁷⁰ Background Study on Preventing Another Mariel, n.d., in folder "Cuba (2/8/1982-2/11/1982)," box 29, NSC-ES-CF, RRL.

⁷¹ Ronald Reagan, *The Reagan Diaries Unabridged*, ed. Douglas Brinkley (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), vol. 1, 40, 54-56.

crimes persisted, which played a role in damaging the collective reputation of all of the “excludables.”) The third group included those whom the Immigration and Naturalization Service detained due to their having committed crimes after their initial resettlement. The crimes did not necessarily make these people automatically excludable. However, once the Immigration and Naturalization Service revoked their parole, they were expected to leave the United States.

Over time, the number of Cubans who belonged in the third category increased. And the more people who were detained, the costlier it became. In 1982, the State Department found that, of the 4,000–5,000 Mariel Cuban “excludables,” 2,555 were still in federal and state facilities — 1,700 of them in the Atlanta Penitentiary, a maximum security facility. According to its estimate, the cost of detaining each “excludable” was \$10,000 per year.⁷²

The cost was only part of the problem. There was also a constitutional problem. Lawyers questioned the legality of the indefinite detention of the Mariel “excludables” and sued the federal government on their behalf. The lawsuit was partially successful. In August 1981, a federal judge directed the government to initiate a review process for their release. This was a debacle for the administration, which immediately appealed the decision. An irritated Reagan complained in his diary. “A judge threatens to release them from our jails and turn them loose on society,” he wrote. “The problem — as yet unsolved is how to return them.”⁷³

⁷² U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittees on International Economic Policy and Trade and Subcommittee on Inter-American Affairs, *Issues in United States-Cuba Relations*, 97th Cong., 2nd, sess., Dec. 14, 1982, 19–20.

⁷³ Reagan, *Diaries Unabridged*, vol. 1, 113.

Reagan was fixated on returning these Cubans to Cuba, but he did not want to ask Castro for help. The U.S. government had to explore other ways to achieve this goal. Here again, Haig favored the use of force. Under his direction, the State Department examined using the military to send the Mariel “excludables” back to Cuba. According to Gillespie, they started to sketch the following plan:

In San Francisco Bay, in northern California, there was a number of old Liberty cargo ships, vessels used during World War II to carry goods back and forth. The idea would be to take enough of those vessels, deploy them to a port somewhere along the Gulf of Mexico, and install metal benches on the decks, which would hold as many people as possible. There would be CIA hired or recruited crews to operate the ships. In the dead of night, we would seek court orders through the Attorney General, take these Cubans out of the federal prisons, bus them, truck them, or fly them, in chains, to the ships, and put them aboard. Actually, they would be shackled to the benches. There would be an automatic machine to open the shackles at a certain moment to release all of them. The Liberty ships would then leave the U.S. port, go to Varadero Beach on the North Coast of Cuba, in Matanzas Province, and be steered toward the beach, on automatic pilot. The crews would then be lifted off by helicopters at the last moment. Then, lo and behold, the ships would hit the beach, and all of these criminal and insane *Marielitos* [Mariel Cubans] would be back in Cuba.⁷⁴

This discussion was unforgettable for Gillespie: “This subject was discussed in this kind of detail by grown men who . . . were considered senior executives” of the U.S.

⁷⁴ Gillespie, interview transcript, FAOH, 237–38.

government.⁷⁵ Stephen Bosworth, then deputy assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, expressed his disgust many years later: “I mean these people all needed adult supervision.” He added, incredulously: “Haig actually said he thought it was a great idea and commended us for our imagination.”⁷⁶

As everyone except Haig seemed to recognize, an operation of this type would entail numerous legal, political, and humanitarian problems. The scheme carried the high risk of being detected by the Cuban government and the substantial probability of loss of life in an expected exchange of gunfire with the Cuban military. The operation would violate international laws, cause unfavorable publicity, and raise questions about the U.S. commitment to the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea.

The Justice Department, Defense Department, and CIA examined other clandestine schemes for returning the migrants. Ultimately, an options paper for the National Security Planning Group meeting concluded: “There is no attractive solution.” The opening of talks with Castro was “the best of a series of poor options available.”⁷⁷ After George Shultz replaced Haig as U.S. secretary of state, Reagan would try diplomacy with Castro, even though it would contradict the administration’s overall strategy of mounting pressure on the Cuban government. Talks between the two countries led to the 1984 conclusion of the first U.S.-Cuban migration agreement, in which the two countries aimed

⁷⁵ Gillespie, interview transcript, FAOH, 237–38.

⁷⁶ Bosworth, interview transcript, FAOH, 57, Feb. 24, 2003.

⁷⁷ Discussion Paper for NSPG meeting on Cuban Excludables, Feb. 25, 1982, CIA-FOIA, CREST, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp84b00049r000701760003-3> (accessed Aug. 23, 2021).

for the normalization of migration across the Florida Straits. The dire necessity of bilateral migration control overwhelmed the logic of the Cold War.⁷⁸

Haig's Legacy: Creating Boundaries

Everyone in the Reagan administration identified Cuba as the source of the problem in Central America and the Caribbean, a region of pivotal importance for U.S. national security. Unlike everyone else, however, Haig was convinced that invading the island nation was the best option available. He remained insistent even after Reagan refused to cancel the non-invasion pledge and his colleagues reminded him of the lack of public support for an invasion. Whatever the problem was that Cuba posed for the Reagan administration, the secretary of state wanted to use military force to solve it.

What is most significant about Haig's plans for Cuba is that they failed. Reagan was a strong believer in the Monroe Doctrine, but he opposed the unilateral abrogation of the 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding. Haig's colleagues had no sympathy for Castro and agreed on the necessity of taking measures against the Castro regime. Nonetheless, they never fully understood why the secretary of state was so determined to invade Cuba, cause an international conflict involving the Soviet Union, and ask the U.S. public to prepare for a possible third world war. Haig embraced the idea of abandoning thousands of Mariel Cubans near Cuban waters, while almost no one else in the State Department, National Security Council, Defense Department, or CIA agreed.

⁷⁸ The administration considered many more top-secret clandestine operations before opening the talks. See Kami, *Diplomacy Meets Migration*, chap. 6.

Even though Haig stood alone in favoring going to war against Cuba, his legacy was far from negligible. The result of all of the discussions about invading Cuba pointed to the impossibility of mounting an easy invasion in the Caribbean nation as had been done in Grenada, a much smaller island. Reagan never seriously thought of using force against Cuba during his presidency. Nor did his successor, George H.W. Bush, who unilaterally renewed the non-invasion pledge, even after the Cold War had ended. Bush and his secretary of state, James Baker, were familiar with Haig's invasion planning and the dismal cost-benefit analysis that would have deterred almost everyone from taking up the cause. They also knew that the secret plan to expel the Mariel "excludables" proved fruitless. The Bush administration demanded the peaceful end of the Castro regime, but when it came to migration, it prioritized cooperation with the Cuban government.⁷⁹

Haig had a major impact on U.S. relations with Latin America, where Cuba played a crucial role. By proposing the most extreme ideas, he inadvertently highlighted the limit of what the United States could, or was willing to, do during the Cold War and beyond. Thanks to Haig, most future U.S. policymakers, including his successors Shultz and Baker, did not have to waste much time and resources considering these more extreme ideas. They acted more cautiously and took a more pragmatic stance on Cuba and the region as a whole. Thus, Haig merits further study — to understand what he tried to do, why he failed, and how his failure shaped the path ahead.

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⁷⁹ On Bush's Cuba policy, see, Kami, *Diplomacy Meets Migration*, chap. 7.

2018) and several articles on foreign policy, migration, and ethnic politics. He is currently preparing a publication on Cuban relations with the United States during and after the Cold War.



4. “In Control Here”: Alexander Haig, Ronald Reagan, and U.S.-Soviet Relations

Simon Miles

Dinner was not going well. Alexander Haig, the U.S. secretary of state, had just met with Andreï Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister. His closest NATO colleagues with whom he was dining — Lord Peter Carrington of the United Kingdom, Claude Cheysson of France, and Hans-Dietrich Genscher of West Germany — should have been fêting him. Haig had cracked the code: After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, his “frank and businesslike” September 1981 meeting with Gromyko showed that the United States could right the ship. And yet, Haig’s dinner companions wondered what the ailing General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev really hoped to — or could — achieve when faced with President Ronald Reagan’s anti-Soviet rhetoric and military buildup. In response, the secretary of state emphasized at length that U.S.-Soviet policy was not determined by the president alone, expounding on his own critical role in the process. When Carrington suggested that the United States had caught Gromyko “on the wrong foot” when Reagan sent a conciliatory letter to Brezhnev in April 1981, Haig chafed at the suggestion that anything but his personal diplomatic skill was responsible for Gromyko’s forthrightness at their recent tête-à-tête.⁸⁰

That dinner in late 1981 was vintage Haig. When it came to U.S. foreign policy — in particular vis-à-vis the Soviet Union — the secretary of state spent most of his brief

⁸⁰ Genscher-Carrington-Cheysson-Haig memorandum of conversation, 23 Sept. 1981, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, B 150/513.

tenure at Foggy Bottom locked in a struggle with the president over who was, in Haig's memorable (and regrettable) formulation, actually "in control here."⁸¹

Moving Beyond Détente

Gen. Alexander Haig was not the obvious choice for Reagan's secretary of state. Looking at Reagan's green foreign policy team, made up largely of loyalists from his days as California's governor, one British observer opined that they would need "sophisticated expertise" on foreign affairs from the likes of a Henry Kissinger-type figure.⁸² Little did he know that they would turn to one of Kissinger's protégés: Haig, the former supreme allied commander Europe and White House chief of staff to Richard Nixon.⁸³

Haig, with his ties to a White House that was virtually synonymous with U.S.-Soviet détente, was far from the clear choice. Reagan had made his political bones as a staunch opponent of détente, even when that meant going against his own party. President Gerald Ford had tried to bring Reagan into his administration, but Reagan turned down offers of a plum ambassadorship to the United Kingdom as well as a cabinet role as either secretary of transportation or commerce.⁸⁴ And when Ford ran for the Republican nomination in 1976, Reagan challenged the unelected incumbent, taking aim at the

⁸¹ "Al Haig and the Reagan Assassination Attempt — 'I'm in control here,'" Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, accessed July 13, 2022, <https://adst.org/2014/03/al-haig-and-the-reagan-assassination-attempt-im-in-charge-here/>.

⁸² Walden memorandum, "The American Presidential Elections," June 18, 1980, National Archives of the United Kingdom (NAUK), PREM 19/1405.

⁸³ Accounts of his tenure in these and other positions can be found in: Alexander M. Haig, Jr., with Charles McCarry, *Inner Circles: How America Changed the World, A Memoir* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1992).

⁸⁴ Lou Cannon, *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power* (New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2003), 399.

administration's dismal handling of foreign policy and emphasizing the dangers of détente.⁸⁵ "The evidence mounts," Reagan charged:

that we are number two in a world where it is dangerous, if not fatal, to be second best. Ask the people of Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, all the others: East Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, ask them what it's like to live in a world where the Soviet Union is number one.⁸⁶

Reagan's attacks on his fellow Republican struck a chord: The Ford administration recognized détente's growing unpopularity and stopped using the term entirely, replacing it with a phrase Reagan later embraced: "peace through strength."⁸⁷

Reagan returned to this theme of weakness in the 1980 election campaign, lambasting the policies pursued by Ford's Democratic successor, Jimmy Carter. He vowed to restore international stability while reviving America's position in the world, including significantly increasing military spending to achieve "a satisfactory correlation of forces" with the Soviet Union.⁸⁸ He argued that the United States must "deal with the Soviet

⁸⁵ Lasault memorandum, Gerald Ford Presidential Library (GFPL), President Ford Committee Records, box A4, folder: "Reagan, Ronald."

⁸⁶ Reagan remarks, March 31, 1976, Hoover Institution Archives, Ronald Reagan Speech Collection, box 1.

⁸⁷ Cheney to Gergen, "Data on Détente," March 11, 1976, GFPL, Rogers Morton Files (RMF), box 1, folder: "Foreign Policy."

⁸⁸ Pipes memorandum, "Foreign Policy Statement with Emphasis on US-Soviet Relations for Gov. Reagan," June 12, 1980, HIA, Fred C. Iklé Papers (FCIP), box 14, "Soviet Union" folder; Ra'anán memorandum, "Proposals for an Address by Gov. Reagan on International Affairs," July 7, 1980, HIA, FCIP, box 14, "Soviet Union" folder; Ra'anán memorandum, "Toward the Evolution of a 'Reagan Doctrine' on Global Strategy," May 26, 1980, HIA, FCIP, box 14, "Soviet Union" folder; and Teller to Reagan, April 19, 1980, HIA, William J. Casey Papers (WJCP), box 292, "Foreign Policy 4" folder.

Union from a position of [military and economic] strength.”⁸⁹ Reagan and his campaign advisers saw their foreign policy agenda, especially toward the Soviet Union, as a return to U.S. diplomatic tradition, from which détente had been a break.⁹⁰ In internal documents, the campaign went so far as to invoke the Munich analogy, casting Carter as the Neville Chamberlain to Brezhnev’s Soviet Union.⁹¹

But, on the campaign trail, these ideas remained theoretical. The mechanics of how to return U.S. foreign policy to its pre-détente norm, if Reagan were elected, was another question and it was left for after the election had been won. In seeking the answer, Haig’s sharp elbows and tendency to ignore White House instructions did not endear him to anyone in the administration, nor did they produce much by way of results.⁹² He was at loggerheads with Reagan’s first national security adviser, Richard Allen, from the outset. But Haig’s feuds with Allen paled in comparison to his ongoing turf wars with Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, a longtime associate of the president (and veteran of the Nixon and Ford administrations) who spearheaded the administration’s defense buildup. Weinberger struggled to find common ground with a man who, as he later wrote, “seemed to be constitutionally unable to present an argument without an enormous

⁸⁹ Meese oral history transcript, Jan. 22, 2001, HIA, Hoover Institution and Gorbachev Foundation Collection (HIGFC), box 2, folder 11; Shultz oral history transcript, June 20, 2000, HIA, HIGFC, box 2, folder 20; and Jack F. Matlock, *Reagan and Gorbachev: How the Cold War Ended* (New York, NY: Random House, 2004), 13.

⁹⁰ Pipes to Lord, “Comment on NSSC-1-82,” March 3, 1982, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (RRPL), Richard E. Pipes Files (REPF), box 13, “03/03/1982-03/04/1982” folder.

⁹¹ IFPAB memorandum, Dec. 25, 1980, HIA, WJCP, box 300, “Interim Foreign Policy Advisory Board” folder; Gray to Casey, Oct. 18, 1980, HIA, WJCP, box 292, “Foreign Policy 5” folder; and Gergen to Casey, Sept. 24, 1980, HIA, WJCP, box 292, “Foreign Policy 4” folder.

⁹² Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 254.

amount of passion and intensity, heavily overlaid with a deep suspicion of the competence and motives of anyone who did not share his opinions.”⁹³

The Reagan administration’s dysfunction is well known. But on the key issue of U.S.-Soviet relations, how were the battle lines in fact drawn? Haig famously believed he would be the “vicar” of U.S. foreign policy.⁹⁴ And later, the secretary of state would profess that he was above the White House infighting, and (typically) that it was the fault of everyone but him.⁹⁵ “Do you think,” Haig asked the dean of Reagan’s biographers, Lou Cannon, “I gave a shit about guerrilla warfare with a bunch of second-rate hambones in the White House?”⁹⁶ But he did care — a great deal — if the frequency and violence of his outbursts aimed at cabinet colleagues were any indication. When Haig resigned in a huff for the third time, Reagan actually accepted his resignation, doubtless much to the soon-to-be-former secretary’s surprise. “He gave only one reason and did say there was a disagreement on foreign policy,” Reagan wrote in his diary of their conversation. “Actually the only disagreement was over whether I made policy or the secretary of state did.”⁹⁷

The West Wing had been the site of a rancorous struggle over foreign policy between moderates such as Haig and Vice President George H.W. Bush on the one hand, and hard-liners like National Security Council Soviet director Richard Pipes and arms control czar

⁹³ Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1990), 29.

⁹⁴ George J. Church, “Alexander Haig: The Vicar Takes Charge,” *Time*, March 16, 1981.

⁹⁵ Alexander M. Haig Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1984), 356.

⁹⁶ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 162.

⁹⁷ Reagan diary entry, June 25, 1982, in *The Reagan Diaries*, ed. Douglas Brinkley, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2009), 139.

Paul H. Nitze on the other (the former being vastly more of a hard-liner than the latter). In a meeting with Vadim Zagladin, first deputy secretary of the International Department of the Soviet Central Committee, Tyrus Cobb of the National Security Council staff insisted six months into Reagan's term that no comprehensive foreign policy had been formulated in the White House. Where was the president? According to Cobb, he was not focused on foreign policy. The economy and domestic issues dominated his thinking, and thus discussions in the Oval Office.⁹⁸

Cautious Optimism

Domestic affairs might have dominated the president's time, but he was not wanting for guiding principles when it came to U.S.-Soviet relations. In fact, Reagan could define his administration's foreign policy program long before the campaign, and in a way that outpaced many of his advisers and continues to elude many looking back on the 1980s: "[A]long with a willingness to negotiate," he told an audience in 1972, the United States "can best protect the peace by maintaining a realistic and credible ability to defend itself."⁹⁹ In marshaling the resources at his disposal in the White House, Reagan developed a dual-track grand strategy.¹⁰⁰ The first pillar — "quiet diplomacy" — was the proverbial carrot.¹⁰¹ Reagan had long seen negotiations with the Soviet Union as

⁹⁸ Zagladin-Cobb memorandum of conversation, June 8, 1981, Arkhiv Gorbachev-Fonda, fond 3, opis 1, delo 15412.

⁹⁹ Reagan remarks, Los Angeles, Calif., Oct. 12, 1972, in *A Time for Choosing: The Speeches of Ronald Reagan, 1961-1982*, ed. Alfred Baltizer and Gerald Bonetto (Chicago, IL: Regnery Gateway, 1983), 103-04.

¹⁰⁰ For more on Reagan's grand strategy, see Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

¹⁰¹ Reagan to Vaschenko, Oct. 11, 1984, in *Reagan: A Life in Letters*, ed. Kiron Skinner, Annelise Anderson, and Martin Anderson (New York, NY: Free Press, 2003), 380.

important not only to keeping Cold War tensions under control, but also (and arguably more importantly) to cementing America's advantage through diplomatic agreements that would constrain the Soviet Union. The second pillar — “peace through strength” — was the corresponding stick.¹⁰² Reagan believed that the United States needed to rebuild its military strength to secure such advantageous agreements, reinforce its alliances (especially NATO) in the struggle with communism, and exploit any opportunities that presented themselves to best the Kremlin economically and diplomatically, as well as militarily and ideologically.

Haig certainly took a dim view of the Kremlin, seeing neither changes in basic Soviet positions nor evidence of flexibility on key issues.¹⁰³ On both sides of the Iron Curtain, and especially in the capitals of America's NATO allies, policymakers grew increasingly worried that Reagan's preoccupation with building U.S. strength meant he would not talk to the Kremlin.¹⁰⁴ To maintain public support, U.S. allies — in Europe in particular — needed their voters to see the president as “more like a friendly uncle than a nuclear cowboy.” They also feared what the consequences for the rest of the world might be if the United States and the Soviet Union kept talking past, rather than to, each other.¹⁰⁵

The July 2, 1981, meeting between Haig and the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatolii Dobrynin, inaugurated overt U.S.-Soviet dialogue and offered some solace to America's allies. For

¹⁰² Reagan remarks, Oct. 19, 1980, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Alexander M. Haig Papers, box 131, folder 8.

¹⁰³ Haig to Reagan, “Brezhnev's Speech,” Feb. 25, 1981, RRPL, REPF, box 9, folder: “02/05/1981-02/28/1981.”

¹⁰⁴ Kukan memorandum, “Schôdzka zástupcov titulárov ZÚ socialistických krajín vo Washingtonu,” April 30, 1981, Archiv Ministerstva Zahranicních Vecí, Teritoriální Odbory-Tajné, 1980-1989, Spojené Státy Americké, box 1, folder 1; and Lequertier memorandum “Les relations américano-soviétiques,” April 6, 1981, Archives Diplomatiques, 91 QO/925, folder: “Relations du pays avec l'URSS et pays de l'Est, 1981 janvier-avril.”

¹⁰⁵ Giffard to Henderson, “The “Transatlantic Crisis,”” March 5, 1982, NAUK, FCO 28/4719.

Haig and Reagan, it was a “benchmark in determining whether there was to be any future for the U.S.-Soviet relationship.”¹⁰⁶ Dobrynin deemed it the most important meeting since his arrival in Washington some 20 years earlier.¹⁰⁷ Haig downplayed the meeting in his memoirs as little more than “a useful exchange,” and not without reason.¹⁰⁸ For U.S. diplomatic strategy, Dobrynin was a stepping-stone. The summer meeting first and foremost laid the groundwork for the secretary of state to meet his Soviet counterpart, Gromyko, when the latter attended the U.N. General Assembly in New York that fall.¹⁰⁹

Neither Haig nor Reagan expected any immediate major breakthroughs. “The process of serious dialogue,” Haig wrote to Reagan on the eve of his meeting with the Soviet foreign minister, “can produce an altogether more solid and durable basis for conducting business and living together than the two superpowers have ever had before.”¹¹⁰ Prior to the meeting, Reagan had stressed in a letter to Brezhnev that he hoped to improve the U.S.-Soviet relationship and renew engagement between the two countries.¹¹¹ But face to face, the two foreign policy chiefs mostly talked past each other. In their first conversation, on Sept. 23, both agreed on the need for change but continued to insist — at length — that the other party was responsible for the downturn in relations. Promisingly, Gromyko committed to developing relations “on a realistic basis, that is, good-neighborly, normal, and businesslike,” taking into account each other’s security interests.

¹⁰⁶ BKA memorandum, “Amerikanisch-sowjetische Beziehungen,” Sept. 3, 1981, Bundesarchiv, B 136/17054.

¹⁰⁷ Haig to Reagan, “My Meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin, July 2, 1981,” July 7, 1981, RRPL, Jack F. Matlock Files (JFMF), box 22, folder: “USSR Diplomatic Contacts 1.”

¹⁰⁸ Haig, *Caveat*, 105.

¹⁰⁹ Haig to Reagan, “My Meetings with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko September 23 and 28,” Nov. 10 1981, RRPL, William P. Casey Files (WPCF), box 3, folder: “Haig-Gromyko Meetings 09/23/1981 & 09/28/1981.”

¹¹⁰ Haig to Reagan, “My Forthcoming Meetings with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko,” Sept. 18, 1981, RRPL, Executive Secretariat–National Security Council (ESNSC), Head of State File (HSF), box 37, folder: “Brezhnev 8105567, 1805658.”

¹¹¹ Blair and Pipes to Allen, “Press Backgrounder on President’s Letter to Brezhnev, 22 September 1981,” Sept. 21, 1981, RRPL, ESNSC, HSF, box 37, folder: “Brezhnev 8105567, 1805658.”

Haig agreed that “[their] relationship had to be a superpower relationship” that recognized that both states had interests and influence that extended beyond their borders.¹¹²

Gromyko focused on Moscow’s frustration with Reagan’s insistence on superiority when he next met with Haig, five days later on Sept. 28 — frustration that was compounded, no doubt, by Moscow’s inability to bring the president himself to the negotiating table. Reagan’s willingness to negotiate, Gromyko charged, was predicated on the Kremlin effectively renouncing its right to have a foreign policy. In his view, Washington claimed such a breadth of interests that all Soviet engagement overseas constituted a threat. But Gromyko and Haig could agree on one thing: how pleased they were that their first meeting had caught the world’s attention.¹¹³

In Washington, policymakers viewed Haig’s talks with Dobrynin and Gromyko with cautious optimism, hoping that they would lead to a “quiet, businesslike, and ... respectful dialogue” between the superpowers.¹¹⁴ The Kremlin concurred. Diplomat Sergeĭ Tarasenko told his French counterparts that although Gromyko did not enter the talks with high hopes, Moscow found the meetings encouraging and looked forward to more.¹¹⁵ The British government, which had feared that the Reagan administration would lose the initiative in dealing with the Soviet Union, now proposed to seize it themselves by hosting Gromyko in London for similar talks, which they anticipated would attract similar international attention.¹¹⁶

¹¹² Haig-Gromyko memorandum of conversation, 14:00–16:50, Sept. 23, 1981, RRPL, WPCF, box 3, folder: “Haig-Gromyko Meetings 09/23/1981 & 09/28/1981”; and Haig-Gromyko memorandum of conversation, 16:50–18:15, Sept. 23, 1981, RRPL, WPCF, box 3, folder: “Haig-Gromyko Meetings 09/23/1981 & 09/28/1981.”

¹¹³ Haig-Gromyko memorandum of conversation, 14:00–18:00, Sept. 28, 1981, RRPL, WPCF, box 3, folder: “Haig-Gromyko Meetings 09/23/1981 & 09/28/1981”; and Haig-Gromyko memorandum of conversation, 18:00–19:00, Sept. 28, 1981, RRPL, WPCF, box 3, folder: “Haig-Gromyko Meetings 09/23/1981 & 09/28/1981.”

¹¹⁴ Haig to Reagan, “Brezhnev’s October 15 Letter,” RRPL, REPF, box 12, folder: “11/06/1981–11/12/1981.”

¹¹⁵ Beauchataud to Cheysson, “URSS–États-Unis: entretien au MID,” Oct. 16, 1981, AD, 91 QO/926, folder: “Relations avec les pays de l’Est, 1981 septembre–décembre.”

¹¹⁶ Keeble to Broomfield, Dec. 3, 1981, NAUK, FCO 28/4583.

Who Was in Control?

That sense of optimism did not translate into concrete progress between the superpowers, and Haig chafed at having little to show for his time at Foggy Bottom. “We have wasted a whole year,” Haig complained when he next met Dobrynin, in the spring of 1982.¹¹⁷ He would not have a chance to make up for lost time. In Washington, his position within the administration had grown increasingly untenable. His sense of his own importance in the administration grated, and he rapidly became marginalized.¹¹⁸ As secretary of state, Haig failed to build a positive relationship with Reagan — or anyone else in the White House, for that matter. He held them all in contempt, and they reciprocated the sentiment.¹¹⁹ He brought, according to Pipes, “a sense of belligerency, [and] a kind of defensiveness about his turf.”¹²⁰ Haig’s response after the attempt on Reagan’s life in March 1981 all but sealed his fate: Alone in the White House, a frenetic Haig announced to the press that he was “in control here,” a matter on which the Constitution disagreed.

Haig’s days were numbered, but instead of recognizing the precariousness of his situation, he redoubled his efforts to shut others out of foreign policymaking. They in turn worked even harder to force him out.¹²¹ Finally, blaming the rest of Reagan’s cabinet and White House staff writ large, Haig declared, on June 24, 1982, that he could no longer function as secretary of state. In his

¹¹⁷ Haig to Reagan, “My Meeting with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin March 16,” March 17, 1982, RRPL, REPF, box 13, folder: “03/15/1982-03/23/1982.”

¹¹⁸ Von Damm to Reagan, June 25, 1982, RRPL, Robert C. McFarlane Files (RCMF), box 1, folder: “Sensitive Chron. 1982 1.”

¹¹⁹ William Inboden, “Grand Strategy and Petty Squabbles: The Paradox and Lessons of the Reagan NSC,” in *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft*, ed. Hal Brands and Jeremi Suri (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 151.

¹²⁰ Pipes interview, Sept. 21, 1990, Liddell Hart Center for Military Archives, TNA 11/95. This critique applied as much to Pipes as Haig.

¹²¹ Cannon, *President Reagan*, 199.

resignation letter, Haig bemoaned the fact that U.S. foreign policy would depart from the “careful course which we had laid out.”¹²² But to Reagan, Haig was no collaborator: “He didn’t want to carry out the president’s foreign policy; he wanted to formulate it and carry it out himself.”¹²³

In contrast to Haig, George P. Shultz, who would succeed him, planned to involve Reagan directly in crafting foreign policy, working with him to implement both tracks of the president’s Cold War grand strategy.¹²⁴ In their first meeting, Reagan and Shultz focused on the need to negotiate with the Soviet Union from a position of strength. Both agreed on the importance of talking to Moscow, and crucially, both saw the United States as being on the cusp of attaining such an advantage. Rather than harangue the president, Shultz listened to him, reinforced his instincts, and charted a foreign policy course in support — not in spite — of what Reagan hoped to do in the world, and above all in the superpower relationship.¹²⁵

Soviet foreign policymakers remembered Shultz warmly from the Nixon years — Nixon was Brezhnev’s favorite president, without a doubt — and made no secret of their pleasure at Shultz’s appointment.¹²⁶ Crucially for Washington’s allies, the new secretary of state at last made Reagan’s thinking about the relationship between peace through strength and quiet diplomacy explicit: “He

¹²² Haig to Reagan, June 25, 1982, RRPL, WPCF, box 3, folder: “Haig Resignation Classified Documents”; and Reagan diary entries, June 24–25, 1982, in *The Reagan Diaries*, Vol. 1, 139. Haig expands on this theme of policy divergence at length in his memoir about his time in the Reagan White House: Haig, *Caveat*, 353–58.

¹²³ Reagan, *An American Life*, 270.

¹²⁴ Shultz interview, July 11, 1989, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library (SGMML), Don Oberdorfer Papers (DOP), box 3, folder 2.

¹²⁵ Clark to Reagan, “Discussion with George Shultz,” June 26, 1982, RRPL, RCMF, box 1, folder: “Sensitive Chron. 1982 1.”

¹²⁶ Kornienko interview, Jan. 19, 1990, SGMML, DOP, box 1, folder 12; Stoessel-Dobrynin memorandum of conversation, July 9, 1982, RRPL, JFMF, box 22, folder: “USSR Diplomatic Contacts 1”; Donald J. Raleigh, “‘I Speak Frankly Because You Are My Friend’: Leonid Ilich Brezhnev’s Personal Relationship with Richard M. Nixon,” *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 45, no. 2 (2018): 181–182, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18763324-20171286>.

bluntly stated that strength and diplomacy are not alternatives to one another, but rather must always be used in concert. In this, Shultz was an accurate representative of the Reagan administration.”¹²⁷ Nearly all disapproval of Shultz’s appointment came from within the White House itself. Some welcomed the arrival of a better manager and foreign policy collaborator.¹²⁸ Others denounced him as another “Haig, only with better media instincts.”¹²⁹

Reevaluating Haig’s Tenure

What, then, are we to make of Haig’s turbulent year-and-a-half at the helm in Foggy Bottom? Three things stand out. First, it is too easy to dismiss Haig’s tenure as “defined by confusion and disorganization,” while viewing Shultz’s as “a period of extraordinary American diplomacy.”¹³⁰ Both of these statements are undoubtedly true. But who was responsible for those outcomes? Looking at Reagan’s view of the world at the outset of his presidency, it is hard to imagine any breakthroughs in diplomacy taking place, especially with the Soviet Union. That would have to wait for a rebuilding of U.S. strength, as the White House saw it, which meant a time of plenty for Weinberger’s Pentagon and lean years for Haig and his team at the State Department.

Second, people make policy. Approaching foreign policy questions as if states were “black boxes” fails to account for the fact that human beings — with human failings — are in charge. Haig’s foreign policy views actually dovetailed with Reagan’s. But their policymaking styles — the latter’s conflict-averse approach and the former’s conflict-centric one — meant that the two men could

¹²⁷ Anatoliĭ Dobrynin, *Sugubo doveritel'no: Posol v Vashingtone pri shesti prezidentakh SShA, 1962–1986 gg.* (Moscow: Avtor, 1996), 533.

¹²⁸ McFarlane to Clark, “The President’s Discussion with Secretary-Designate Shultz,” June 26, 1982, RRPL, RCMF, box 1, “Sensitive Chron. 1982 1” folder.

¹²⁹ Von Damm to Reagan, June 25, 1982, RRPL, RCMF, box 1, “Sensitive Chron. 1982 1” folder.

¹³⁰ Alexandra T. Evans and Evan D. McCormick, “Rex Tillerson’s Last Act: Leave Quietly or Go Down Fighting,” *Washington Post*, March 13, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/03/13/rex-tillersons-last-act-leave-quietly-or-go-down-fighting/>.

not find common ground even as Haig's handling of meetings with his Soviet counterparts corresponded to the president's priorities. Style trumped substance in bureaucratic politics.

Third and finally, the classic periodization of Cold War history is, as more details emerge from opening archives, less and less useful. The breaks between, for example, Reagan and Carter, or Haig and Shultz, are beginning to evince greater elements of continuity, complicating more straightforward narratives of paradigm changes accompanying changes in personnel.¹³¹

How, then, are we to evaluate the success of a cabinet officer such as the secretary of state? We could judge a secretary of state by how faithfully she or he carries out the policy preferences of the president, for better or for worse. Or we could prize those who steer or moderate those preferences in the most helpful way. Or we could simply focus on results, without thought to how they reflect administration priorities or how they are achieved.

What would it have taken for Alexander Haig to have been a good secretary of state? The glib — and not entirely helpful — answer is to have not been Alexander Haig: fewer tantrums, fewer resignations for show, and fewer fights picked. A more useful answer is not to have been Reagan's first secretary of state. Haig's was not a personality suited to quiet diplomacy. But that was the order of the day so long as Reagan felt U.S. power was inadequate to the task of making the type of diplomatic deals that would benefit the United States over the Soviet Union. Quiet was not Haig's style, even if he and the president saw things very similarly: He wanted the splashy summits that Reagan doubted were in the U.S. interest in the climate of that time.

Haig will not, in all likelihood, join the ranks of America's most gifted secretaries of state. Knowing what we now know, however, it is hard to imagine how anyone could have overcome the structural challenges and presidential preferences for biding time that Haig faced.

¹³¹ T.M. Nichols, "Carter and the Soviets: The Origins of the US Return to a Strategy of Confrontation,"

Diplomacy & Statecraft 13, no. 2 (2002): 21-42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/714000318>.

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5. One Last Try for Détente (or “The Importance of Keeping Cool”): Al Haig and Afghanistan

Rob Rakove

“Keep cool in Kabul,” read the handwritten note from Joseph Califano. Passed to an exasperated Alexander Haig during the latter’s confirmation hearing, it had nothing to do with Afghanistan. Califano, serving as counsel to Haig, had become alarmed by his client’s increasingly heated responses to questions about his involvement in the Watergate scandal. Noting that his client’s neck had “turned red at some insult,” Califano attempted to distract Haig with “meaningless humor” (the phrase stemmed from a statement Haig had made, earlier in the hearings, describing the Carter administration’s response to the April 1978 Marxist coup in Kabul). For the moment, the joke worked, but further Watergate questions from Democrats Paul Sarbanes and Paul Tsongas ultimately drew Haig’s ire. Califano’s note earned a minor place in confirmation-hearing lore, but little could be done to keep Alexander Haig from collision with his many antagonists — in Congress or elsewhere.¹³²

Kabul, of course, was not “cool.” Moscow’s December 1979 intervention in Afghanistan had passed its first anniversary two weeks earlier and combat was raging between the Soviet 40th Army and its mujahideen opponents. For the incoming administration of President Ronald Reagan and its ambitious secretary of state, the ongoing Soviet war

¹³² U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings Before the Committee on Foreign Relations on the Nomination of Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to be Secretary of State*, 97th Cong, 1st sess., 1981; David Ignatius, “A Modern Witch Hunt,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 18, 2012, A23; and Alexander M. Haig, Jr., *Caveat: Realism, Reagan, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 50.

presented a crucial, unavoidable test for U.S. policy. While the Reaganites could agree that the conflict signaled a failure by the Carter administration, the new administration was sharply divided as to what the Soviet intervention signified and what response it demanded after Inauguration Day. Hardline anticommunists on the National Security Council staff, especially Richard Pipes, regarded the Soviet invasion as a premeditated act of aggression, perhaps even a first move in the direction of the Persian Gulf.¹³³ Haig maintained, however, that the Soviet Union could be negotiated out of Afghanistan and that serious dialogue with Moscow could attain this outcome and perhaps restore some of the stability of the détente system. Overshadowed by other events and issues in Haig's brief, turbulent tenure, his Afghanistan diplomacy was nevertheless illustrative: of his ambitions and outlook, of his clashes with the White House staff, and of Haig's own peculiar self-destructive tendencies.

Afghanistan: “The Most Pressing Problem”

As the “vicar” for foreign policy of the incoming Reagan administration, Haig shared certain tenets with his more hawkish counterparts on the National Security Council staff. In his confirmation hearing, he faulted his Carter administration predecessors for failing to prevent the Soviet invasion, going so far as to express his belief that Moscow had instigated the 1978 overthrow of the Afghan government of Mohammed Daoud Khan.¹³⁴

¹³³ Memorandum, Pipes to Clark, July 29, 1982, Executive Secretary (ES) NSC, Country File (CF), Near East South Asia (NESA), box 34, “Afghanistan, 7/29/82-5/2/83,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library (RRPL).

¹³⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations on the Nomination of Alexander M. Haig, Jr. to be Secretary of State*, 34–35, 48–49. Citing this presumption, Raymond Garthoff observes, “Haig was the best informed on foreign affairs of the senior members of the Reagan administration, but this was a relative matter. Haig displayed abysmal ignorance when he attempted to do more than list the cases he confidently cited.” Raymond L. Garthoff, *Detente and*

Concurrently, however, Haig declined to make a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan a prerequisite for the broader improvement of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union. He rejected applying a “rigid scorekeeping chart” against the Soviet Union in an April 1981 interview. The following month, he suggested that a total withdrawal need not precede substantive discussion of other issues, opining, “We must maintain flexibility and a sense of purpose.” Unlike his counterparts on the National Security Council, Haig did not perceive the invasion as premeditated expansionism, but, rather, as a Soviet error enabled by the outgoing administration’s failure to warn Moscow. “I have always believed,” he told reporters in March 1981,

that our dealings with the Soviets are best served by clear delineations of lines which cannot be crossed without damage to our relationships. I think they behave better under that kind of a clear situation, and I know that miscalculations are inevitably reduced.¹³⁵

He was, he informed Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, no “harborer of devil theories” to explain Soviet behavior.¹³⁶

Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1994), 1052n.

¹³⁵ “Secretary Haig Interviewed for French Television,” *Department of State Bulletin* (DOSB) 2049 (April 1981), 15; “Interview on the ‘MacNeil/Lehrer Report,’” *DOSB* 2050 (May 1981), 3; and “Interviews at Breakfast Meetings,” *DOSB* 2050 (May 1981), 11

¹³⁶ “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union,” Feb. 3, 1981, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1981–1988, Vol. III, Soviet Union, January 1981–January 1983* [Hereafter FRUS 1981–1988, III], Doc. 12, 30, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d12>.

Haig's determination to confront Moscow over the invasion was guided by his own self-confidence, and by suggestions in early 1981 that progress could be attained on the Afghan question. During a February 6 dinner at the home of Illinois Sen. Charles Percy, Dobrynin suggested that his government was willing to contemplate a phased withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Haig found Dobrynin's discussion of the issue to be "uncharacteristically reasonable." The Soviet ambassador reiterated the suggestion on at least two other occasions that spring.¹³⁷ In an address in Tbilisi, Brezhnev, he also noted the possibility of a phased withdrawal.¹³⁸ By no means had Moscow changed course definitively. Haig himself pondered the ambiguities of Dobrynin's offer in his memoir, *Caveat*:

But what did autonomy mean? Was it genuine independence? We both knew that the withdrawal of Soviet forces and the establishment of an Afghan state that had even a scintilla of genuine autonomy would mean the fall of Moscow's puppet [Babrak Karmal] and the slaughter of his followers by outraged Afghan patriots in a matter of days.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ "Memorandum from Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan," Feb. 6, 1981, FRUS, 1981-1988, III, Doc. 16, 42, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d16>; "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union," March 28, 1981, FRUS, 1981-1988, III, Doc. 35, 92, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d35>; and "Memorandum from Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan," April 3, 1981, FRUS, 1981-1988, III, Doc. 38, 100, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d38>.

¹³⁸ Telegram 135634, State to USNATO, May 23, 1981, Jack Matlock Files, box 40, "US-USSR Relations (May 1981)," RRPL.

¹³⁹ Haig, *Caveat*, 108.

Haig was understandably skeptical that Washington and Moscow meant the same thing when they discussed the installation of a nonaligned regime in Kabul. Nor was the Reagan administration prepared to meet Moscow's likely preconditions for a withdrawal: the cessation of all external aid to the Afghan insurgents and recognition of the existing Kabul regime of Babrak Karmal. The fine print of an Afghan settlement remained unclear, as did the diplomatic and military acts required to attain it. Given these hurdles, one may wonder why the two superpowers dabbled with the issue in 1981 and 1982 to an extent that they would not in succeeding years.

To be sure, some dialogue on Afghanistan was necessary in the wake of the Soviet invasion and after the Reagan campaign had highlighted the issue. Yet, when set alongside other regional, more volatile issues, Afghanistan represented a relatively safe topic. Caribbean problems galvanized Reagan and his advisers, who linked upheaval in El Salvador to Cuban action and clamored in the early weeks of the administration for decisive action. On Latin American matters, Haig shared the general hawkishness of his peers, to the dismay of Dobrynin, who exclaimed at one point, "All I ever hear from you is Cuba, Cuba, Cuba!" The prospect of Soviet intervention in Poland, meanwhile, where the Solidarity trade union had rallied popular support against the communist government, represented another potentially dangerous question. In vain, Haig sought assurances from Dobrynin that Moscow would not intervene. Intent on withdrawing as soon as it became feasible, the Brezhnev Politburo would have found Afghanistan a constructive topic by comparison. A number of senior Soviet officials had become convinced, after one year, that military victory could not be attained. Haig's proclaimed confidence in the value

of negotiations, and in his own ability to conduct them across a broad array of issues, could scarcely be overlooked.¹⁴⁰

For his part, Haig repeatedly identified Afghanistan as an issue of fundamental concern to the United States. Asked by Dobrynin in July 1981 if a Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan was an absolute condition for bilateral relations, the secretary replied that it was “a profoundly important issue.” He urged Moscow to accept a summer European Community proposal for a conference on Afghanistan or devise its own constructive counterproposal. In a letter to his Soviet counterpart, Andrei Gromyko, Haig termed Afghanistan the “most significant” matter confronting the two superpowers. Reinforcing the European Community initiative served multiple purposes: It offered assurance to nervous Western European governments of the Reagan administration’s interest in continued superpower diplomacy, while placing the onus on the Soviet Union to deliver a meaningful response. Yet, the endeavor fell flat. Soviet First Deputy Foreign Minister Georgiy Korniyenko informed U.S. chief of mission Jack Matlock of his government’s rejection of the European proposal, angrily accusing the United States of using Afghanistan as an excuse to elevate tensions around the world.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ “Memorandum from Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan,” 99; Haig, *Caveat*, 107; Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2011), 58–63; Hideaki Kami, *Diplomacy Meets Migration: U.S. Relations with Cuba During the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 190–97; and Gail E. S. Yoshitani, *Reagan on War: A Reappraisal of the Weinberger Doctrine, 1980-1984* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 48–55.

¹⁴¹ “Memorandum of Conversation,” July 2, 1981, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 66, 187, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d66>; “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union,” July 11, 1981, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 73, 220, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d73>; and “Telegram from the Embassy in the

Korniienko's discussion of Afghan issues hewed much more closely to the party line, and Matlock's reports convey none of the constructive tenor that Haig sometimes attained with Dobrynin. Yet, the Soviet official was not entirely wrong. Haig held a dual view of Afghanistan: as a necessary bilateral topic and as a Soviet pressure point. The day after Matlock's report reached Washington, Haig personally cabled his ambassadors, instructing them to "direct maximum energy and initiative to mount a sustained offensive against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and Soviet intransigence on a negotiated withdrawal." At stake was more than the continued Soviet presence in Afghanistan: Haig perceived an opportunity to rebut Soviet claims that the Reagan administration sought to renew the Cold War.¹⁴²

Like his peers and successors within the Reagan administration, Haig understood Afghanistan as a unique Soviet vulnerability. His proposed international pressure campaign stood to add to Moscow's discomfort. But a distinction may be drawn here, because Haig's discussion of the issue in communiqués to allies and subordinates conveyed little sense of a personal desire to extract a cost from the Soviets. To Haig, Afghanistan simultaneously represented "the most pressing problem" and stood to provide "the greatest improvement in the international situation." If the Soviet invasion had toppled the Nixon-era détente regime, a negotiated withdrawal might restore East-West dialogue in the new decade. He wrote to Reagan, on the eve of his meetings with Gromyko, that he perceived the talks as "a potential contribution to your objective of

Soviet Union to the Department of State," July 24, 1981, FRUS, 1981-1988, III, Doc. 76, 225-31,

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d76>.

¹⁴² Telegram 196537, Washington to all posts, July 25, 1981, ES NSC, CF, NESAs, box 34, "Afghanistan, 7/14/81-12/28/81," RRPL.

putting the U.S.-Soviet relationship on a sounder footing by linking improved bilateral relations with increased Soviet restraint.”¹⁴³

Breaking with the Administration’s Position

Thus, Afghanistan assumed a prominence within the September talks that appears to have surprised Gromyko. After fairly orthodox policy statements from the two senior officials during their first session, on September 23, Gromyko deemed the topic to have been exhausted. Yet, Haig attempted to raise the issue again late in the second session, prompting Gromyko to declare that if the two sides returned to Afghanistan, nothing would be left of them “but the bottom of their shoes.” Haig remained undaunted, but he evidently concluded that creative action was necessary to break the impasse: both on the topic of Afghanistan and between the superpowers in general. In a third, less formal meeting with Gromyko, the secretary departed from his government’s existing position, which called for an immediate Soviet withdrawal. Observing that both governments appeared to desire an independent, nonaligned Afghanistan, Haig suggested that a phased Soviet withdrawal could accompany efforts to broaden the Kabul regime, while outside powers acted to limit external interference in Afghan affairs. No evidence exists to suggest that he did so with Reagan’s prior approval. Most likely, Haig believed he enjoyed the latitude as “vicar” to stray from stated policy, if the potential rewards justified the risk.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Telegram 196537; and “Memorandum from Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan,” Sept. 18, 1981, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 84, 250, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d84>.

¹⁴⁴ “Memorandum of Conversation,” Sept. 23, 1981, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 88, 257–72, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d88>; “Memorandum of Conversation,” Sept. 23, 1981, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 89, 273–79, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d89>;

Amid a difficult conversation, Gromyko did not dwell on the offer except to muse that maybe the two superpowers might have the opportunity to resolve the problem. His ministry did not respond immediately, but a month later Dobrynin presented Haig with a Soviet *démarche* expressing interest in “a more specific discussion of the pertinent questions” of a political settlement in Afghanistan, to be held in a “business-like manner, in the spirit of realism, and without unnecessary polemics.”¹⁴⁵

The *démarche* was modest and speculative, and Haig took it in stride. In a subsequent memorandum to Reagan, he allowed for the possibility that it could be a “tactical ploy” but contended as well that “we cannot exclude the possibility that it is a signal of tentative willingness to negotiate seriously.” He proposed conferring with major NATO allies and Pakistan before directing Ambassador Arthur Hartman in Moscow to begin discussions with Gromyko. While he noted the absence of familiar language blaming Pakistan and the United States for unrest in Afghanistan, he could hardly be accused of overselling the *démarche*.¹⁴⁶

Although Haig’s analysis of the *démarche* was sensible, two other facets of his response call for explanation. First, he waited nearly 17 days before writing a memorandum to Reagan, advising him of the Soviet note. Second, he declined to share transcripts of his

and “Memorandum of Conversation,” Sept. 28, 1981, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 90, 280–304, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d90>.

¹⁴⁵ “Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Nance) to President Reagan,” Dec. 2, 1981, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 109, 372–73, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d109>.

¹⁴⁶ “Memorandum from Secretary of State Haig to President Reagan,” Nov. 17, 1981, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 109, Tab A, 371–72, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d109>.

recent conversations with his counterparts on the National Security Council staff. Neither act served Haig well in the ensuing chain of events. Haig did not record his reasons for delay, but his dilatory delivery of the note to Reagan cost precious time during the autumn. Haig's secretiveness toward his rivals can be explained readily, but his evasive conduct served to enflame the suspicions of National Security Adviser Richard Allen's deputies, who set about locating a transcript of the Gromyko meeting. "Can you apply pressure to wrench this material from Haig and his myrmidons?" an annoyed Pipes asked Allen. While they conducted their investigation and formulated their response, the National Security Council staff withheld Haig's memorandum from Reagan, who remained blissfully unaware of the Soviet demarche for the remainder of November.¹⁴⁷

Transcripts from the Gromyko meetings ultimately validated suspicions from Haig's colleagues that he had strayed from the established U.S. position on Afghanistan, allowing Deputy National Security Adviser James Nance to attach a refuting cover memo over Haig's own note and the demarche itself. The Soviet offer, Nance claimed, could only have come in response to Haig's unilateral action and should not be taken seriously. The inference was at most circumstantial.¹⁴⁸ In any case, the machinations of Allen and his deputies added another two weeks of delay, so that Reagan only learned of the Soviet demarche on December 3 — 10 days before the Polish government arrested the leadership of Solidarity *en masse*, bringing the evaluative phase of the administration's Cold War policy to an abrupt end.

¹⁴⁷ Memorandum, Pipes to Allen, November 18, 1981, ES NSC, CF, NESA, "Afghanistan, 7/14/81-12/28/81," RRPL.

¹⁴⁸ "Minutes of a National Security Council Meeting," Oct. 16, 1981, FRUS, 1981-1988, III, Doc. 94, 325-26, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88vo3/d94>; and "Memorandum from the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (Nance) to President Reagan," Dec. 2, 1981, 370.

A Pyrrhic Victory

The Polish crackdown did not end Haig's efforts to initiate talks about Afghanistan, but in all likelihood, it eliminated whatever slim prospects those talks enjoyed. Already embattled within the administration, Haig found himself the sole voice appealing for a cautious response. The stiff package of sanctions approved by Reagan 10 days after the suppression of Solidarity augured a more confrontational approach toward Moscow. Early the following year, National Security Adviser William Clark tasked Pipes with co-drafting a new national security statement. Approved in May 1982, NSDD-32 called for the global containment and reversal of "Soviet control and military presence" while increasing the costs of Soviet support of "proxy, terrorist, and subversive forces." James Graham Wilson terms NSDD-32 "a triumph for the administration's hardliners."¹⁴⁹

Haig was not immune to the punitive spirit animating the administration. Nor does he appear to have been especially grounded. He had warned Soviet officials for months against repressing the Polish opposition. The crackdown dealt a devastating blow to his project of establishing comprehensive dialogue with Moscow. In a January 1982 National Security Council meeting, Haig unnerved some of his peers with suggestions of militarily "sealing" the Western Hemisphere. Afterward, in a staff meeting, Haig adopted a visibly pugilistic tone, contemplating his upcoming follow-up meeting with Gromyko. He seized upon reports of Soviet chemical weapons use in Afghanistan, declaring, "I want to let the

¹⁴⁹ James Graham Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 27-32. Pipes worked alongside former Secretary of the Air Force Thomas Reed.

bastard [Gromyko] know what we have so I can hand it to him.” “It is getting eerie, very eerie,” he mused elliptically at one point.¹⁵⁰

Haig indeed raised the chemical weapons allegation in his January 1982 meeting with Gromyko but was fundamentally intent on negotiations and would remain so for the rest of his short tenure. Soviet officials, including Dobrynin, continued to inquire about the possibility of Afghanistan-specific talks, which Haig recommended to Reagan in an extensive early April memorandum.¹⁵¹ Once again Haig’s timing was unfortunate, although in this instance he could hardly be faulted: The Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands diverted the White House’s attentions and precluded immediate consideration of Haig’s proposals. Worse, Haig’s futile efforts at South Atlantic shuttle diplomacy aggravated his fraying relations with the White House staff, fueling a growing whisper campaign against him. Clark, once Haig’s deputy, now worked to circumvent him, advising the beleaguered secretary: “You’d better understand that from now on it’s going to be the *President’s* foreign policy.”¹⁵²

Haig’s project of expert-level talks on Afghanistan survived his own meteoric fall. In his third and final series of meetings with Gromyko, in mid-June 1982, the two senior

¹⁵⁰ “Memorandum of Conversation,” Jan. 21, 1982, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 134, 425–31,

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d94>.

¹⁵¹ “Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Soviet Union,” Feb. 25, 1982, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 143, 486–87, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d143>; “Telegram from the Embassy in the Soviet Union to the Department of State,” Feb. 26, 1982, FRUS, 1981–1988, III, Doc. 144, 488–89, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d144>.

¹⁵² Haig, *Caveat*, 306–07; Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role Of A Lifetime* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 164–68; and Simon Miles, *Engaging the Evil Empire: Washington, Moscow, and the Beginning of the End of the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 44–45.

diplomats agreed to hold such talks in Moscow. Clark, however, had engineered a National Security Council meeting while Haig was in New York, an event that contributed to Haig's forced resignation a week later. By the time Hartman held talks with Korniyenko on Afghanistan, Haig had left office.¹⁵³

Haig's rivals had opposed the project. Pipes tried in vain to derail the initiative, deriding it as a Soviet proposal that only stood to legitimate Moscow's presence in Afghanistan, but he had to settle for shackling Hartman with a pre-approved negotiating position. One indignity among many imposed on the beleaguered Haig, the restriction was also unnecessary. The worsening Cold War climate and the improbability of Hartman reaching terms with the pugnacious Korniyenko rendered the talks a hollow exercise and a Pyrrhic victory for the outgoing secretary. By that point in time, U.S. efforts to publicize the Soviet war had reached a critical mass. Reagan had signed into law legislation marking March 21, 1982, as "Afghanistan Day," a holiday that would be commemorated for the remainder of his presidency. Reagan's sympathy and material support for the Afghan resistance deepened over time, as did his hopes for its ultimate victory. Contrary to Haig's hopes, progress on Afghanistan would only follow successes attained on other fronts and come amid a general waning of superpower hostilities.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ "Memorandum of Conversation," June 19, 1982, FRUS, 1981-1988, III, Doc. 187: 605-20, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d187>. There is no currently available record of the Hartman-Korniyenko talks. Secretary of State George Shultz mentioned their outcome in a conversation with Gromyko. See "Memorandum of Conversation," Sept. 28, 1982, FRUS, 1981-1988, III, Doc. 217, 723, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1981-88v03/d217>.

¹⁵⁴ Memorandum, Pipes to Clark, June 8, 1982, ES NSC, CF, NESAs, box 34, "Afghanistan, 6/2/82-7/2/82," RRPL; and Memorandum, Clark to Reagan, May 24, 1982, *ibid*.

Alexander Haig's pursuit of a negotiated Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan exemplified the best and worst of his brief, stormy tenure as secretary of state. Apprehending genuine signs of Soviet distress, he doggedly sought a diplomatic opening, without succumbing to the fervid interpretations of Moscow's behavior held by his rivals in the White House. As he sought to restore some vestige of the détente system, the former general proposed a frontal assault on one of the chief problems that had undermined it. He did so virtually alone, supported only by his department, and without significant input from Reagan. This, however, led him into dangerous territory, tempting him to improvise in a way that undermined his own efforts and presaged the disagreement over Lebanon policy that precipitated his firing. Haig's own volatile temperament and overbearing manner, meanwhile, deprived him of potential allies and the understanding of his president, amid a deteriorating Cold War climate. In the end, cool could not be kept — neither in Kabul nor in Washington.

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