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HOUSTON, March 20—At the end of his two-day Texas visit, President Nixon today strongly defended his policies of cooperation with the Soviet Union and hailed the joint space project scheduled for next year.

The President spoke before several thousand persons at the Lyndon B. Johnson Space Center here after inspecting the Apollo-Soyuz test project and greeting American astronauts and Soviet engineers and technicians.

Despite political and ideological differences, Russian and American objectives in many areas are the same, the President said.

Working together these "two great people" may find the "spark" that opens doors to new advances which working separately they would not find, he said.

"Let us have the statesmanship to see that we work together, not separately," the President said as he defended detente.

He also vigorously applauded the American space program and urged the ground and air crews here to "always look out to the unknown, take any risk, make any sacrifices, and never be discouraged because sometimes you may fail."

Whether he was talking indirectly about his own troubles in the presidency and of his determination to fight to retain his office was unclear. But he made no other reference that had anything to do with Watergate and its problems.

Tuesday night, the President reasserted his intention to stay in office before the annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters as part of a new campaign to win public support in his battle with Congress.

Early today, the President left his hotel for a walk in downtown Houston, stopping once at a drugstore to have a cup of coffee.

Then he returned to his hotel for a breakfast with 75 Texas leaders presided over by former Governor and former Treasury secretary John B. Connally.

According to one person who attended the private meeting, Connally praised the President's leadership role in the United States. Mr. Nixon responded with a 45-minute speech devoted entirely to foreign policy, making no mention of Watergate or other domestic issues, it was said.

After his tour of the space center, the President returned to Washington. (He arrived at the White House in late afternoon.)

While at the space center, Mr. Nixon presented Distinguished Service Medals to Skylab III crewmen, Gerald P. Carr, Edward G. Gibson and William R. Pogue. He invited them to spend a weekend with their wives at Camp David, Md.

"I think they will enjoy the lonely solitude of that beautiful place, which Franklin D. Roosevelt called Shangri-La," Mr. Nixon said. Sometimes when the clouds at Camp David "are right around you, you may think you are in space," he told the astronauts.

The President said he would like to volunteer for one of the first space flights for non-astronauts, which he said may be possible by 1980.

Some people still ask "why go to the moon" the President noted, the answer he said, is that "A great people must always explore the unknown. Once a great people gives up or bugs out, drop out, of competition of exploring the unknown, that people ceases to be great."

Emphasizing his conviction that this country must work with Russians, Chinese and other peoples, he said that Soviet and American doctors working together "may find that spark that each separately might not ever find" to discover the answers to "the diseases that devastate mankind."

Detente Roll Is Defended By President