

Day Began Early For Nixon, Aides

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With floods in Mississippi and storms threatening Washington, President Nixon flew to Mississippi yesterday to dedicate a naval air station named for a Democratic senator who has been a more loyal supporter than many Republicans.

And the President took with him for reporters and photographers to see the two aides who have been under the most direct fire in recent weeks and who were noticeably absent when Mr. Nixon went to Key Biscayne for the Easter weekend.

John D. Ehrlichman and H.R. (Bob) Haldeman, who had been expected by many Washington observers to resign or be dismissed, were aboard the President's plane for yesterday's trip, and Haldeman as usual carried his home movie camera to record the presidential day.

The two aides avoided reporters, however, and Ehrlichman declined an invitation by pool reporters aboard the aircraft to meet with them. He often had met with them in the past; Haldeman almost never has.

Rain was pouring in sheets at Andrews Air Force Base early yesterday when the President and Mrs. Nixon, accompanied by Sen. John C. Stennis (D-Miss.) and Mrs. Stennis, took off for Mississippi.

They left earlier than scheduled to fly over the flood area in west Mississippi before landing at the naval air station outside Meridian for the dedication of the Stennis Center, named for the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

It was the second trip to Mississippi of the 71-year-old senator since he was seriously wounded outside his home here in January when he was the victim of a robbery and shooting.

He appeared to be in good health, and his voice was very

strong when he spoke, but he is still a patient at Walter Reed Army Hospital here and he was accompanied by his doctor.

There was never any hint of scandal or Watergate at the naval air station, where a large and friendly crowd applauded the President and the senator.

The Democratic senator made what sounded like a nominating speech for the Republican President.

"Mr. President, we admire you for the worker you are," Stennis said. "You worked your way up against adversity and you do not panic when things go the wrong way or when the going gets rough.

"I know what it is to tough it out. We admire that quality

in you because we in Mississippi have had to tough it out a lot," he said.

Turning to two recently released POWs present, Stennis praised their courage and said to them what must have been music to the President's ears: "Except for a courageous and unyielding President you would still be in prison."

Referring to Mr. Nixon's for-

eign policy ventures last year, the senator predicted "further achievements by him in 1973," and said that last year's accomplishments could not have been possible but for the President's "courageous heart and tough mind."

For a President who has heard nothing in recent weeks but charges of scandal, the words must have been particularly sweet, yet he replied to the high praise in a matter-of-fact, unemotional tone.

He was full of praise for Stennis and for the courage of Mississippians who have suffered from the damaging floods. However, the President's phrases were halting at times as though other things were on his mind. As is his custom, he often stole from his previous speeches.

His theme was peace and freedom and the necessity for this country to remain militarily strong.

"The prospects for peace and freedom are bright," the President said, "provide the United States stays strong, and provided we meet our responsibilities as a world power."

The United States must not reduce its strength first and "then trust to the good will and the good intentions of others."

The President did not look particularly tired or distraught (although some of his aides did), but he hurried back to his plane when the ceremony ended, apparently anticipating news that he would receive shortly after he boarded it for the return flight to Washington.

At 2:46 p.m., press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler informed the pool reporters aboard the Spirit of '76 that L. Patrick Gray III had just announced his resignation as acting director of the FBI.

For the first time, Ziegler announced that the President had "a long discussion" Thursday night with Attorney General Richard G. Kleindienst. After the meeting with the President, the Attorney General later that night discussed their conversation "with Mr. Gray . . . at the President's request," Ziegler said.

He would never say that the President through Kleindienst requested Gray's resignation, but the implication was clear.