

The President Takes to the Friendly Skies

Post 12/30/73

MR. NIXON'S Deputy Director of Communications Kenneth W. Clawson told reporters the other day that the President had decided to fly the friendly skies of United Airlines to California "to set an example for the rest of the nation during the current energy crisis." The White House press aide, Gerald Warren, elaborated: "It just demonstrates his confidence in the airlines." The White House Press Secretary, Ronald Ziegler, said after the flight that the President "learned something about the problems flying commuters face." Finally, by way of summing up the official White House view, anonymous "spokesmen" gave it as their opinion, according to a story in this newspaper on Friday, that Mr. Nixon's sudden, surprise flight to his San Clemente home by commercial airline for the New Year's Day weekend had been a "political triumph."

Setting an example . . . building confidence . . . a learning experience . . . a political triumph—the White House commentary on this extraordinary episode suggests the presence of all those elements that are most sorely needed by the public and the President at this dismal stage of the proceedings. Surely some example-setting on the part of the President is in order. Certainly public confidence could stand some rebuilding. There is a lot the Nixon White House could usefully learn about the problems that ordinary people face these days. And Mr. Nixon has probably never been in greater need of a real political triumph. What is so telling, not to say pathetic, about all this is that the White House has felt obliged to find precisely these elements in such large measure in so essentially irrelevant an affair.

To put it briefly, hundreds of thousands of passengers give daily expression to their confidence in American commercial airlines. Confidence in our nation's airlines is not the issue. Nor, in the relative scale of things the

President needs to learn, would we put very high the inconveniences encountered by air travelers. In addition, we can think of any number of examples that the President, by his personal as well as official conduct, might usefully set for the rest of us. If anything, in this particular sequence of events, it would seem to us that the public, by its voluntary response to the fuel shortage, has long since set the example for the President.

Finally, we think that it says something quite serious about Mr. Nixon's own estimate of his present position that he should find a political triumph in having brought off this eccentric and irresponsible act. We say eccentric because the gesture bore no relation to the requirements of the energy crisis. And we say irresponsible because of the acknowledged risks to the President's well-being and security that were an indisputable part of his travel plan. One has only to consider what has become—and for sound reasons—the accepted method of presidential travel over the years, to recognize the dangers to which the President subjected himself and, by indirection, the country. It seems fair to assume that there was good reason for providing the President with Air Force One and all the accompanying communications gear and accommodations for aides and advisers, not to mention the carefully thought out security precautions and protections. It is hardly surprising that responsible officials in his own government, charged with protective functions, publicly expressed their dismay at the haste and carelessness with which this journey was undertaken.

This was, in short, one of those empty gestures—another triumph of form over substance—with which we have become all too familiar. When you add to this the genuine risks involved, it becomes in addition one more measure of how desperate the President must perceive his own political condition to be.