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Camp David Now a Fortress

Post 6/26/73.

Franklin Roosevelt called it his Shangri-la, Eisenhower, who had a plainer way of doing things, renamed it after his grandson David, the Marines disguised it as Camp Number Four in those dismal winter days after John Kennedy was shot.

But that mood passed, too, and the mountain-top retreat where Richard Nixon seems to spend most of his thinking life these days is back to its 1950s name — Camp David.

Camp David ought to be an ideal place for presidential meditation — a Walden in Maryland to which modern chief executives should be able to come for an occasional weekend of intellectual and spiritual refreshment. They can come and write or sleep, or watch the white-tailed deer and the chipmunks and stroll forever through the wild cherry and the sassafras which clothe these remote Catoctin peaks: they can ready themselves for the week ahead, sort out their problems, and for once, relax.

But to Mr. Nixon, Camp David seems to have become less a Shangri-la, more a Berchtesgarten, less a Walden, more a prison. To the disappointment of many of the local farming people, Camp David, under Mr. Nixon's rule, has now come to look like a prison.

The writer is a Washington correspondent for The Manchester Guardian, from which this article is excerpted.

To reach Camp David, you drive — unless you are Mr. Nixon, in which case you go by helicopter accompanied by two fully armed gunships a mile away on each beam. You drive north from Washington for perhaps an hour, until the northern end of the Appalachian ridge heaves its shimmering, smokeblue bulk on to the western skyline and lifts you up on to its wooded flanks.

From Thurmont you strike up into the old volcanic Catoctins themselves, past Chimney Rock and Wolf Rock, and to the right of Camp Misty Mount, which was recently swept out for the Russian contingent that accompanied Leonid Brezhnev. As you sweep past these thickly forested peaks, the scenery is idyllic — green, placid, clear and still. But suddenly, without a warning, the outlook changes. A small fence appears at the roadside. "No trespassing," it warns, "this is private land." Then come new, smaller notices: "No stopping, slowing, turning, or standing here," they command, unsigned, suggestive of a dire penalty for disobedience. And then, as the ferns and the hemlock thin, you see the Fence.

It is just like Berlin. There are in fact three fences. One, tall and silvery new, tipped with barbed coils. Another, smaller, with porcelain insulators on the supporting stanchion and just visible signs with red lettering, behind that another taller, mesh fence, and more barbed wire.

And in the trees on Nixon's side of the final wall, a figure moves swiftly into cover: a rifle swings up, there is a glint of sun on telescopic sight as a camouflaged Marine surveys you, charts your every move and telephones your presence to some mystery controller in the mountain depths. A Jeep screeches to a halt on the roadway behind you and politely, but very firmly indeed, you are told to go.

"They say a rabbit couldn't get into Camp David without the Defense Department knowing," says Don Gaver, the rugged park ranger who keeps the deer and the possum and the raccoons well and happy outside the fences.

"All this was put up when Mr. Nixon came, of course. And he seems to use the place more than any other president before him. The forests are always crawling with security folks nowadays—it's not like it used to be up here."

Ranger Gaver's ill-concealed melancholy is shared by many of the hill and valley people around: and whether for this reason or another, half the hill farms nearby are now up for sale.

The latest gripe is that Mr. Nixon has ruined a local beauty spot to get rock to pave the Camp David poolside; telephone cables streak through the once unspoiled woods; microwave dishes connect the retreat with the underground Pentagon, 20 miles northward on the Pennsylvania border.

The local distaste for the retreat is one thing the people seem to have in common: a profound ignorance of just what now goes on behind the wire is another.

"I only know one thing for sure from what I've seen while I've been here," Ranger Gaver says. "And that is the fact that President Nixon's dog obviously doesn't like helicopters. Each time he flies up here a secret serviceman arrives a few hours later, driving a blue Chrysler with a black vinyl roof. The setter is always on the back seat, being chauffeur-driven, you might say."

The setter is one of the few things that goes in and out of Camp David by road. The Chrysler turns off at a gap in the triple fence, past a dozen gun-toting guards, turns a corner past the blockhouse, and is gone from view. Just what goes on there now, just what can be seen today around that corner, few seem to know and even fewer seem to want to tell.

David S. Broder's column, which usually appears on Sundays and Tuesdays in this space, will now appear on Sundays and Wednesdays.