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BY HUGH SIDEY

Castle on the Catoctin

Franklin Roosevelt called it "Shangri-La" after that legendary kingdom of joy and beauty deep in the Himalayas. Dwight Eisenhower renamed it Camp David after his 5-year-old grandson, whose signature is on the guest book in the block letters of a child and later in the adult hand of a President's son-in-law. Richard Nixon is using it more than anyone ever did.

His 117th visit in four years stretched out to two weeks. It wasn't even certain he would come down from the top of 1,900-foot Catoctin Mountain at the end of that period. It was the longest Camp David sojourn anyone could remember. No President has been so out of sight in the last decade.

"It is the nearest thing we have to a medieval castle with a moat and foot guards," boasts a White House aide. The "moat" is a double steel fence which surrounds the 200 acres. The foot guards are marines who patrol night and day. Beyond them is a cleared "no-man's-land."

The stream of visitors invited up for conferences board their helicopters at the Pentagon pad and make the 75-mile run up the Potomac River valley in half an hour. They are dropped delicately in the midst of the dense forest on a special pad, then shuffled to their cabins and meetings by an in-camp limousine service. The public is kept at a distance, and the press is allowed in only for brief and thoroughly controlled glimpses. At night the searchlights bathe the perimeter and pick out the red landing lights of the helicopters. It reminds you of a bit of fiction, *Seven Days in May*.

But there is no coup involved this time. In fact, just the opposite. Nixon is planning a governmental reorganization which will change his superstructure and, he hopes, bring yet more power to the White House. He may even fire a few people. Back in Washington the huge government machine has stopped dead, waiting for the word.

The cabinet officers, White House staff members and bureau heads who have taken the trip to Camp David are struck first by how cold it is when they arrive. It can be as much as 20° below the temperatures in the valley, with a wind constantly cleansing the air. They are taken first to preliminary hearings with the President's subalterns H. R. (Bob) Haldeman, George Shultz and John Ehrlichman. Then, when they have made their initial reports and have in turn been told what the President wants from them, they are taken into the presence of Nixon. There is always a fire in the fireplace, steaming coffee available, a casual atmosphere, although the time of each session is strictly monitored. Sometimes Nixon shows up in his checkered sports coat, but more often he is in his inevitable gray or blue business suit. His aides, however, feel more relaxed, showing a taste for blazers with "Camp David" pocket patches. A few have tried lumberjack shirts. Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, whose blood runs a little thinner than the others', dug out the big, blue Mao coat that he got in China.

Perhaps the morning and evening hours are the most pleasant. On the good days there is a glorious sunrise at about 6:30 a.m. A week ago the trees were festooned with ice, and the scene which Nixon showed his guests from his tall windows was breathtaking. Nixon and his family can walk over the trails unphotographed, almost unseen by anyone. (The Secret Service agents hide in the holly and behind the thick poplar trunks.) One administration official came back last week reporting that he had seen Nixon strolling in a pair of purple, flared trousers. No wonder no pictures. Like White House photographer "Buck" May, there must be somebody around who remembers what happened back in 1932 when they tried to humanize Herbert Hoover at his Rapidan hideaway by sitting him on a horse (which Hoover hated) and showing him fishing at the special pond which had been stocked with fish for easy catching.

The Nixon paraphernalia is all there—an IBM Executary to record the President's thoughts when he is alone, a paper shredder for doodles and other discarded memoranda. A huge trailer with ten phones, overstuffed chairs, a coffee-maker, a color television set and a podium for Ron Ziegler to stand on is meant to provide for the hardy handful of press who insist on watching the mountaintop. It was dragged in as a reluctant gesture. A special garbage shuttle takes the Nixon garbage 30 miles to a landfill dump. Other dumps handle the rest of the garbage nearer to home by burning it (thereby contributing faintly to the local air pollution problem, a touchy issue right now in the mountains).

The paper flow is constant. Packets arrive by helicopters which sometimes number six a day. Limousines come the ground route in fog. Long-distance telephone copying machines record key documents that are sent from the White House. The navy mess provides the food, more basic than Swiss chef Henry Haller dishes up back on the Potomac, but suitable to the rustic atmosphere. They even cooked the Thanksgiving turkey.

With all that gear it is a wonder that Nixon manages to get away at all from his burdens of office. But a curious psychological phenomenon is at work. Senators and cabinet officers are reluctant to press demands when they know Nixon is at Camp David. White House staff members who can always locate the President or Mrs. Nixon around the White House sometimes find their trails vanish for a few minutes at Camp David when they walk in the woods. It turns out to be a respite for everybody.

There is even some humor. The visitors who have been talking about the new shape of the government joke on their return ride to Washington about whether their helicopter is the one with the trapdoor in it. And then there was the report that when Nixon does come down from the great Catoctin Mountain this time, he will bring his new orders on stone tablets.