

Westward the isolation booth

Richard Nixon has come up with a line that may last. Washington, he said, is like the old television quiz show isolation booth, a device which allowed the audience to see and hear the person on the spot but did not allow the outside sounds to get in to him.

The image has a faint aroma of mothballs but can be forgiven because it is so right. Those who participate in the rituals of power along the Potomac these days develop an impervious sort of arrogance after a while. All those sounds of real people going about real work out there are strained out by the bureaucracy. The sight of pain and dirt intrudes into that special White House world only electronically or on the tidy pages of the President's special daily news summary.

Nixon has adopted a pattern of escape, jumping the Appalachians whenever he can. If there is time, he heads for the Golden West, stopping along the way in the heartland. The problem is that he brings the isolation booth with him. There may be no help for it in this age, but the fact is that the very governmental apparatus that takes him on these odysseys practically foredooms most honest contact with the American audience. Nixon's own choice of cities and towns assures that he will walk only among those who already believe.

It would be more accurate, perhaps, to say that what he seeks and generally finds is adoration. This is something Presidents need, even as other people, so it is not to be dismissed. What is strange is the notion that a President can look down from the luxurious interior of Air Force One cruising at 35,000 feet, or drop in on a few certifiably friendly outposts, and come away with a clear picture of what is on the national mind. This is one

of the presidential myths that needs to be put to rest.

A fortnight ago Nixon went west in the style to which he has become accustomed. Fargo and Salt Lake City, where good friends reside, were selected as the way stations. The Secret Service and the advance political scouts sanitized the route. An edition of the *Fargo Forum* with a compilation of complaints about economic conditions in the farm belt was sent back to the White House the day before departure, a warning to the travelers not to stray too far beyond the safe boundaries.

North Dakota Republican voters, who outnumber Democrats, were called upon to rally. The governor, William Guy, a Democrat but by right of office the traditional host for visiting Presidents, perceived a distinct lack of enthusiasm for him and his wife in the ceremonial events. Of the 10 governors and mayors called in for consultation, seven were men of Nixon's political persuasion.

The moment he alighted from his splendid jet, the President was taken literally in hand by the eager Republican candidates of the area. Congressman Mark Andrews, towering above the President, grew so enthusiastic that he was squeezing the presidential shoulders and nudging Nixon along the fence where the people stood, as if Nixon were personal property. Senatorial hopeful Thomas Kleppe hovered at the other arm. When Andrews loitered behind Nixon, big smiling Clark MacGregor, who is running for the Senate against Hubert Humphrey just across the Red River in Minnesota, was absorbing some of the fringe benefits of the presidential presence. Joy ran thick and

deep, matching the sunny weather. A few war dissenters infiltrated the gatherings but their voices were faint and their endurance limited. Those who reached for Nixon's hand were all his confessed partisans or people who came to see a parade. It is sometimes hard to tell which urge is strongest. The size of presidential receptions has grown steadily over recent years no matter who was in the White House.

In Fargo, a woman in the street gave Nixon a glance, then knelt down and went about her real business—photographing his bubble-top limousine. Her husband measured the distance so that she could focus her movie camera and then began barking instructions like Cecil B. deMille directing a spectacular. Another citizen patted the shiny car, wandered off fulfilled. One onlooker spent his time explaining to others how they had shipped the big auto in by plane the day before.

Nixon's majestic air caravan left the flatlands and spanned the Rockies in euphoria. There was more of the same in the safe harbor of Salt Lake City. A chant of war dissent didn't do much but authenticate local enthusiasm for the visitor. The President rallied with the elder statesmen of the Mormon Church, whose fondness for Republican officeholders has been well demonstrated. He attended a rodeo in the city's new Salt Palace and there heard announcer Clem McSpadden relate that cowboys, besides getting a lot of ribs broken and skulls cracked, never burn their draft cards.

The glistening jet finally came to rest, 13 hours after it had left Washington, in the protective expanses of the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, and Nixon was whisked off to San Clemente in a helicopter. There, he settled down for nine days in his beautifully manicured estate that juts into the soothing Pacific. High walls and lush planting seal him off from the monotonous suburban developments that march endlessly across the brown hills just beyond his five-acre oasis, and shut out the freeways and power grids that scar land and sky.

When Nixon ventured out to the baseball game between the Washington Senators and the California Angels, his companion was millionaire owner Gene Autry. The President dined with California's Senator George Murphy and Governor Ronald Reagan. During the working hours his men flooded in by jet from Washington to give their reports as the President sat in his quiet office which looks out over the undisturbed blue of the ocean.

The East-West ritual plainly refreshes Nixon. It brings the pleasing touch of power to all his supporters. But the President ends up as he started, in the isolation booth.

