

The Peking Primary

By TOM WICKER

IN THE NATION

It was a typical campaign day, more or less. Senator Muskie said he'd debate his Democratic rivals—maybe, if everything could be worked out. Senator Jackson denounced Senator Muskie and Governor Wallace as "extremists" on the busing issue. Senator Humphrey suffered something of a setback in the convention delegate selection of his home state. Mayor Lindsay told the Florida Legislature he favored busing, and Representative McCloskey told the Concord, N. H., Rotary Club that he favored tax reform. The Dartmouth College newspaper endorsed Senator McGovern, and the Florida Supreme Court told Mayor Yorty he'd have to stay on the Florida ballot, like it or not.

Meanwhile, in Peking, President Nixon met for four hours with Premier Chou En-lai, having previously sat down for historic talks with Chairman Mao Tse-tung and attended a revolutionary ballet in the Great Hall of the People. Jenmin Jih Pao, the Chinese Communist newspaper, broke every precedent to devote two pages to the Nixon visit, and the whole world watched most of these events via excellent satellite television.

Ed Muskie would be the first to admit that, at this stage of the campaign, he would be better off debating Chou En-lai than Henry Jackson. Similarly, George McGovern knows there's more political mileage in two pages of Jenmin Jih Pao than in an editorial of "The Dartmouth," just as Mayor Lindsay would surely rather be orating in the Great Hall of the People than in the Florida Capitol. And all of that prime time on the satellite is free.

Mr. Nixon—whatever else he may be accomplishing in China—is therefore giving his Democratic and Republican rivals a lesson in the hard fact that if you're going to run for President, it helps most of all to be President. No other campaign headquarters is so powerful as the White House, and no other political apparatus does for a candidate what the powers of the Presidency do.

An exercise of those powers as sweeping and exciting as Mr. Nixon's visit to China not only makes the routine campaign activities of his opponents look picayune by comparison; it also has useful subsidiary benefits. On Capitol Hill, for instance, the liberals are handling the President's Attorney General-designate, Richard Kleindienst, with kid gloves. Ordinarily, in an election year, they'd be salivating over Mr. Kleindienst's cavalier attitude toward the Bill of Rights; but with the President in Peking, nobody wants to appear to be cutting him down from behind.

Seldom in American history has the fundamental political power of the Presidency been more prominently displayed. In 1948, for one lesser example, a hard-pressed President Truman called Congress back into session in mid-summer in order to show the country that it would not pass his liberal program, which it didn't. In 1964, much evidence suggests, President Johnson responded to the Tonkin Gulf episode with the first air attacks on North Vietnam at least partly to defuse Barry Goldwater's charges that he was conducting a soft, "no-win" policy in Southeast Asia. But Mr. Nixon's China visit dwarfs these Presidential power plays.

This is not to suggest that the President planned his trip solely for domestic political purposes. It obviously is a much larger and more important event than a mere campaign ploy. Yet, its very size suggests that no President could have undertaken it without thorough consideration of the political consequences and without careful timing and planning for maximum public impact. And rightly so; for if Mr. Nixon believes that an opening to China is necessary, it is his Presidential duty to muster as much domestic support for that opening as possible.

This will be small comfort to those Democrats who still have 24 primary campaigns to slog through. They know better than anyone that the China visit probably is what George McGovern called it—"the most significant contribution the Nixon Administration will make"—and that therefore it also puts forward the President's best political foot.

They know that there is more summitry to come, in Moscow; and that Mr. Nixon well may be able to enter the fall campaign more fatigued by world travel than by primary campaigning and proclaiming himself the man who reopened the door to China, brought nearly half a million men home from Vietnam, and negotiated a strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviets.

Good Democrats though most of them are, and however they may differ with Mr. Nixon on such issues as Vietnam, there can be scarcely a man or woman running for his job who, on a purely political basis, would not like to have that platform. Incumbent Presidents can be beaten, but it has happened only twice in this century, which is why the spectacle from Peking must have made it seem colder than ever in New Hampshire this week.