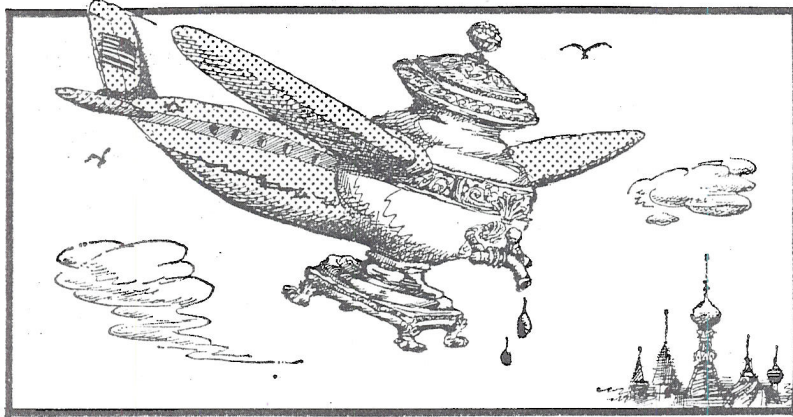


The Samovar Papers



Stan Mack

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, March 27—Professor Kissinger, who has been arranging President Nixon's visit to the Soviet Union, has run into a samovar problem with the Kremlin leaders.

The difficulty arises from the President's desire to make his televised appearances in Russia just as diverting as his recent appearances from China. In Peking, one of the great moments occurred at a state banquet when the President surprised the television audience by eating his dinner with chopsticks.

The President does not want the Soviet leaders to feel that he has slighted them. He wants to assure them of equal banqueting surprise time on television. For this reason he has been practicing hard on the samovar for the past month.

His plan, which Professor Kissinger put to the Russians, was to preside at a big samovar during a great banquet in the Kremlin and produce the tea for the entire assemblage.

The President has, in fact, become so proficient on the samovar that among the press releases already composed for release during his May visit to Moscow is one which begins, "President Nixon last night became the first American President to make tea from a samovar in the Kremlin. . . ."

That press release will probably have to be scrapped. The Russians, though insisting that they are willing to go to great lengths to make the trip a success, say they have polled the members of the Central Committee and found that 82 per cent want coffee instead of tea after dinner.

They say it would be a gross provocation for the President to ignore the preference of the majority and concentrate his attention upon the out-of-step few who want tea.

If the President wants to make the coffee, they have told Professor Kissinger, they will not object.

Professor Kissinger has inquired whether the coffee could be made in a samovar. The Soviet central banqueting collective has replied that it takes years to learn to make a good cup of coffee in a samovar. It would be more practical, the White House has been advised, for the President to leave the banqueting hall, go into the kitchen and make the coffee in five ten-gallon vats similar to those used in American drugstores.

Excellent TV camera positions can

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be arranged by the vats to provide good angles of the President turning knobs and releasing steaming coffee.

Professor Kissinger has told the Soviet leaders that this is not what the President had in mind. He has explained that the President wants to show that he is sufficiently interested in Russian culture to master some aspect of it. The coffee vat, with its poisonous brew, was purely American, he protested.

The Kremlin said, in that case, maybe the President would like to tend bar during the cocktail hour. They say the cocktail hour is an old Russian cultural tradition invented soon after the discovery of vodka. The President could master it very rapidly, they said, with just a few hours practice on some vodka and dry vermouth.

Naturally, Professor Kissinger said no, and the samovar issue was left unsettled while the Russians and the professor argued about how small the President's airport reception crowd should be.

The Russians, who do not want to be outdone by the Chinese, want the welcoming crowd limited to seven people. Professor Kissinger is asking for billions, naturally; he is accustomed to dealing with the Pentagon.

The Russians say this is impossible because their economy is booming so magnificently that no more than seven people can be spared from the factories. Professor Kissinger has replied that the United States will supply its own crowd, composed of C.I.A. agents assigned to the Soviet Union, if the Russians will promise not to take their pictures. He awaits a Soviet reply.

Leonid Brezhnev, the head Communist, has personally intervened in the samovar issue. If the President wants to do something on television to illustrate his mastery of some phase of Russian culture, Mr. Brezhnev has suggested to Professor Kissinger, he might learn to dance while in the deep-knee-bend position. Mr. Brezhnev says this would make for a smashing TV finale to a Kremlin state banquet.

Or, he has suggested, the President might like to wrestle a bear. It is not known what President Nixon has decided, but over the weekend bear tracks were seen in the White House Red Room.