

Spectacle and Substance

The footlights are up, the cameras are grinding; one of the great TV spectacles of this or any other year is underway. President Nixon departed for China with elaborately staged fanfare on the White House lawn and the signing of a proclamation making tomorrow the day of his arrival in Peking, a "National Day of Prayer" for world peace.

There is no lack of genuine drama in this first visit of an American President to "the Middle Kingdom," symbolizing a reversal of policies in Washington and Peking that could have repercussions throughout the world for decades. There may indeed be genuine diplomatic value, as well as incalculable political dividends, for the President in the massive worldwide publicity this dramatic gesture will command. At the very least, Americans and Chinese will be compelled to look at one another in a new and more kindly light when they see their leaders exchanging pleasantries in Peking during the public manifestations of their private "search for common ground."

But there is also genuine danger that the spectacle which Mr. Nixon has so assiduously cultivated will obscure the substance of the deep-rooted problems he will begin to discuss next week with China's leaders. The emphasis on the drama of the Presidential visit could foster the "illusions" about Chinese-American relations against which Mr. Nixon himself has repeatedly warned.

As the image of President Nixon in Peking, in Hangchow, in Shanghai, flashes across millions of television screens it is essential that all Americans, from the President down, retain a sense of perspective. Even though Mr. Nixon's visit may thrust Peking to the center of the world's stage for the next few days, that does not mean China has suddenly become the center of the universe as the Chinese have imagined since ancient times.