

Two Moods Over Nixon's Mideast Trip

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President Nixon leaves on a nine-day trip to the Middle East today in an atmosphere of controversy in Washington and expectation in the Arab world.

It will be the first time an American President has toured the Arab states and Israel while in office and American officials said that they expect Mr. Nixon to accelerate the trend toward improved Arab-American relations.

They also said that they anticipate a new pledge by Mr. Nixon of continued American support for Israel when he meets with the new Israeli government during the mission which will take him to five Middle Eastern nations.

Because of the impeachment investigation in Washington, many political observers here have tended to

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denigrate the Nixon trip as an attempt to divert public attention from Watergate.

The White House has steadily denied this charge.

Senator Henry M. Jackson (Dem-Wash.), a frequent administration critic, said yesterday on television that the trip "doesn't make much sense."

"It is more cosmetic and ceremonial than it will be substance," he said on CBS' "Face the Nation."

Jackson said also that "It's poor judgment on the part of the President to be out of the country while the House Judiciary Committee moves into a serious phase of the charges against him.

"He's going to be besieged overseas by the free world press; our allies are going to wonder what's going on."

The trip, however, has been supported by some members of Congress. Senator Charles H. Percy (Rep-Ill.) said on Friday that he fully backs the mission as important to American diplomatic efforts.

In Damascus, Syrian President Hafez Assad said on ABC's "Issues and Answers" program that his nation "is seriously endeavoring to have good and normal relations with the United States." Mr. Nixon is scheduled to visit Syria next Saturday and Sunday, and Assad said he will arrive at a time when "We are aiming at the restoration of diplomatic relations."

Assad added: "We always wanted the United States to have an even-handed policy. But it was clear to us that the U.S. was biased toward Israel which was aggressive and which had occupied our territories and dispossessed the great part of our people."

Assad noted that America has vital interests in the Arab world.

"These interests can grow and prosper in the atmosphere of good relations with the Arab people, while they could be fatally weakened in the atmosphere of hostility caused by the biased policy toward aggressive Israel," he said.

Two prominent Republican senators yesterday also criticized the President's trip to the Mideast and the one later this month to Moscow.

Edward Brooke (Rep-Mass.), said he believes President Nixon's trip to the Middle East is "patently political" and "will not serve a real useful purpose."

Brooke made the remark in a talk with reporters before addressing a commencement gathering at Michigan State University.

"I would hope the President would change his mind, but obviously he is going," Brooke said.

James Buckley (Rep-N.Y.) said that Water-

gate had created a domestic situation where President Nixon could go "waltzing off to Moscow in an atmosphere where he cannot achieve what normally would be achievable."

He said he fears the trip will be a "mission in futility."

The senator said April 9 that Mr. Nixon should not go to Moscow while impeachment proceedings are pending.

Buckley, elected by the Conservative party and now a member of the Republican caucus in the Senate, was interviewed on the "WABC Radio Press Conference."

He was asked whether he thought the President would be negotiating from a position of weakness in Moscow and replied:

"The Soviets, quite probably because of what they see in terms of our domestic situation here, they've hardened their lines, they have appeared to become more intransigent in terms of what they will and will not discuss at the SALT (strategic arms limitation talks) meeting.

"So that I have the feeling that in many real respects a mission to Moscow is a mission in futility."



AP Wirephoto

PRESIDENT ASSAD
He's awaiting Mr. Nixon

