

Nixon Visit Causes a Stir At Isolated Maine Base

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LIMESTONE, Me., July 3 —Painters swarmed all over Loring Air Force Base the last few days, civilians with rollers covering every surface in sight and long-haired young men touching up the faded signs that warn of guard dogs patrolling the perimeters of this big Strategic Air Command outpost plopped down here among the potato fields.

A red carpet was ordered up for President Nixon's arrival and a special set of stairs for disembarking from Air Force One was flown in. Hundreds of airmen—including at least one lieutenant—culled the grass with plastic sacks picking up scraps of paper and cigarette butts. Roads were resurfaced and mowers chopped through the long grass. Last night, an airplane sprayed against insects.

The President's arrival from the Soviet Union for what was billed as a "major address" during a brief refueling stop here on the way to his Key Biscayne retreat had all the theatrical panoply of an official "news event."

There was a loyal cheering crowd, largely composed of Air Force personnel and their families, members of the Caribou High School Band, with plumed hat and their Viking mascot symbol on the back of their maroon jackets, and the presence of network pool television cameras, one of whose trucks wandered over the Canadian border and got briefly lost yesterday.

Rural Populace Unexcited

But, in the gently rolling countryside outside the base, where the potatoes are just beginning to show in long green rows, the President's visit appeared to elicit little enthusiasm and a troubled sense of the country's present situation seemed evident.

The Presidential visit, it is to be sure, one of the biggest things that has happened to this part of Aroostock County in some time, and is, as one serious young man said this afternoon in nearby Caribou, "a great honor."

But, while the air base was in a frantic flurry of activity, there was little discussion of Mr. Nixon's short stopover on the streets or in stores and restaurants. Reporters from outside the area who pressed local residents found a jumble of opinions ranging from a distrust of the President, a Yankee suspicion of all politicians, to a strong feeling that the Watergate situation had dragged on too long and the opinion that the press was at fault in the matter.

But, inside the big hangar at the air base, where several thousand people, many in military attire, had gathered to welcome the President, there were applause and shrill whistles of greeting as the plane swooped out of the blue sky shortly after 7:30 this evening.

Limestone is a crossroads town that calls itself "the home of the world's best potatoes, largest bombers, fastest fighters and mightiest tankers." The last phrase was added to the signboard outside of town after KC-135 Stratotankers were assigned

to the 42d Bomb Wing here.

The town itself is dwarfed by the air base, which is staffed by 4,100 military personnel who have 8,100 dependents, and which also employs 830 civilians. The latest census figures show 7,881 persons living on the base itself and 2,479, including many military personnel living in the rest of town, a number of them in the trailer camps outside the base's gates. In 1972, townspeople in Limestone cast 598 votes for President Nixon and 261 for George McGovern. (Service personnel cast military ballots.)

The Air Force B-52 bombers roar out from what was once virgin forest—in reduced numbers now, because of the energy crisis—over the potato fields that are the economic mainstay of this part of Maine.

The planting was late this spring, because of rains, but in late September schools will let out for the children to work in the fields and the crops will be stored in cool potato houses—low, barn-like buildings with earth mounded almost to the roof—to be cleaned and sorted through the cold winter.