

THE EX-PRESIDENT

Nixon's Embarrassing Road Show

Even for Richard Nixon, it was an extraordinary and dubious venture. There was the ex-President, thoroughly disgraced in his own country, being treated in Peking as if he still occupied the Oval Office and Watergate meant nothing more than a fancy apartment building. With Wife Pat at his side, Nixon waved from the door of his plane as in campaigns of old. He waded into excited crowds, shaking hands as if he were running for the Politburo. He discussed foreign affairs with Chinese leaders as if he were still Henry Kissinger's boss. The ex-President clearly relished the chance to play a role once again on the international stage. But in so doing, he

could broker a deadlocked Republican convention this summer and tip the nomination to Texan John Connally, the lapsed Democrat. Whether that was true or not, it was clear that, whatever his ulterior motives, Nixon had allowed himself to be manipulated by Peking for the purposes of Chinese, and not U.S., foreign policy. Following by just 2½ months an unproductive trip to Peking by Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger, the Nixon visit had to be, as one Chinese diplomat put it, "a slap in the belly of Kissinger with a big wet fish."

There was an almost spectral air about the visit. Nixon arrived in Peking on a chill, foggy night aboard a white Chinese Boeing 707 that appeared on the airport tarmac like a phantom out of the mist. The former President and Mrs. Nixon walked down the red-carpeted ramp to be greeted by China's Acting Premier Hua Kuo-feng, Foreign Minister Ch'iao Kuan-hua and a group of 350 Chinese. There was no military guard to greet Nixon and his entourage of 20, including 15 Secret Service men (20 journalists were also along, among them TIME Diplomatic Editor Jerrold Schecter, who was with Nixon on his previous trip to China). Nixon was whisked away in a black "Red Flag" limousine to the same government guest house in Peking where he stayed in 1972.

The trip came almost precisely four years after Nixon, then still President, had paid his first visit to inaugurate what both sides had hoped would be an era of U.S.-Chinese rapprochement.

This year's trip also coincided with the 25th Communist Party Congress going on in "revisionist" Moscow. Clearly, the Chinese wanted to show their unhappiness over the slow pace of "normalization" under the Ford Administration and, more importantly, over Washington's support of the policy of détente with the Soviet Union. When Nixon was President, Mao & Co. evidently believed that he stood for a strong U.S. position against the Soviet Union. With Ford and Kissinger, however, the Chinese believe, rightly or wrongly, that the U.S. has become dangerously "soft" on the Russians.

During his four days in Peking, Nixon met with Acting Premier Hua four times for a total of ten hours. He had an hour and 40 minute audience with Chairman Mao, finding him "alert, in good humor, and gracious."

In many respects, it was a vastly changed Nixon who toured China. His shoulders were more stooped, his gait slower. He favors the left leg, on which he was operated for phlebitis in 1974, and wears an anti-embolism stocking on it to keep fluids from accumulating. Nixon was accompanied by his own U.S. Navy medical corpsman who took his blood pressure at least twice a day, and a top doctor from Peking Hospital was also assigned to him during the visit.

The ex-President tired visibly toward the end of the trip; yet in Kweilin, a city famous for its landscapes of jagged hills and misty waterways, he was able to walk up some 300 yds. of steep stone steps to visit the Reed Flute Cave, apparently with no ill effects.

There were moments of the same old lame humor and banality. After touring an agricultural exhibit in Peking, the former President quipped: "We'll make an even trade. We'll send you technology if you send us the pretty girls who showed us around today."

Partly Sandbagged. In his more weighty public remarks, Nixon, inadvertently or not, did exactly what the Chinese would have wanted. At the opening banquet, hosted by Hua Kuo-feng, he seemed to paraphrase China's own foreign policy position by saying: "There are, of course, some who believe that the mere act of signing a statement of principles or a diplomatic conference will bring lasting peace. This is naive." Many believed that Nixon was alluding to the Ford Administration's signing of the Helsinki declaration with Moscow, an act strongly condemned by China. Nixon denied that interpretation. "My God," he said, through Aide Jack Brennan, "I've used that statement a dozen times before, and I used it in a general context. There is no such thing as instant peace. It could also apply to the United Nations Charter or the Shanghai communiqué or any international document." Nonetheless, coming in the midst of specifically anti-détente remarks by the Chinese, Nixon's statement lent itself to the interpretation that it was a slap at Ford's policy—and thus precisely fitted Peking's mood.

The next night the Nixons were invited to a soirée presented by the Performing Arts Troupe of China, at which Mao's wife, Chiang Ch'ing, served as host. When the troupe finished a song promising the liberation of Taiwan, Chiang Ch'ing jumped to her feet and applauded wildly. Nixon half rose and applauded perfunctorily in turn. When he was told later that a news account described him as having stood and applauded the song, Nixon angrily replied through an aide: "Like hell I did! It was just a gentleman-to-a-lady gesture. I stood up for a lady who was standing, not for the song." Nonetheless, though Nixon presumably did not want to endorse Peking's position on Taiwan, he had allowed himself to be at least partly sandbagged on a crucial issue. The

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profoundly embarrassed the U.S. and its policymakers at an extremely sensitive juncture in U.S.-Chinese relations.

The reaction back home ranged from annoyance to outrage. "If he wants to do this country a favor," Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater commented acidly, "he might stay over there." About the most gentle comment made in the wake of the trip came from an aide to President Ford. "You can't blame Nixon for hankering for some kind of resurrection," he said. Ford himself acknowledged that Richard Nixon's China trip was "probably harmful" to him in New Hampshire, and before the primary, most Administration spokesmen seemed to feel that Nixon's purpose was less to resurrect himself than to crucify Ford. Some even speculated that Nixon wanted to harm Ford in New Hampshire so that the ex-President