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Nixon's Trip: New Flap for White House

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Even safely back from his trip to China, Richard M. Nixon continues to be a source of embarrassment for President Ford, not to mention Mr. Ford's press secretary, Ron Nessen.

Ever since the Nixon trip was announced in mid-February, Nessen has been bombarded with questions about its domestic political implications, the President's feelings about it, whether there were any plans for Mr. Ford or other high administration officials to talk to Nixon about what he learned in China.

Nessen has consistently downplayed its significance, calling it the journey of "a private citizen." As late as Tuesday, when he announced that Nixon would make a written report on the trip to the State Department, Nessen was saying he knew of no conversations about the trip between the former President and Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger.

It turned out that Nessen didn't know half the story and as a result the embarrassed press secretary had to call a special news briefing yesterday to straighten it out.

It began with a report by columnist Jack Anderson, later confirmed by the State Department and finally by the White House, that Nixon's written report was arranged during a telephone conversation between him and Kissinger Monday night.

Nessen described "the scenerio of events" behind the flap this way:

• On Monday, ^{MAR} Kissinger, vacationing in Palm Springs, Calif., called Nixon at his home in San Clemente. In response to a question from Kissinger, Nixon said he planned to file a written report on the trip with the State Department.

• Later Monday, someone at the Nixon compound telephoned "a functionary" at the White House with word of the written report arrangement. This is all that Nessen announced on Tuesday. ^{2 MAR}

• On Tuesday, Kissinger called his former aide, Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, the chief of staff of the National Security Council, and told him of the conversation with Nixon. Scowcroft, according to Nessen, didn't bother to tell anyone else at the White House about the Nixon-Kissinger conversation.

• Yesterday morning, ^{WED} Kissinger told the President about the conversation. Nessen quoted Mr. Ford as saying he "didn't give it much thought."

More than anything, the entire flap illustrated the determination of White House aides to shield the President from any association with Nixon, whose re-emergence into the news they consider a political liability for Mr. Ford. Nessen kept up that line yesterday.

"This is really an accurate reflection of the fact that people around here don't spend all their time worrying about or trying to find out about contacts with Nixon," he said.

Nessen was asked whether he still considered the Nixon trip the journey of a private citizen.

"Yes," he replied softly.