

A New World For the President



Mary McGrory

Washington

AS THE PLANE was climbing the friendly skies, an assistant White House press secretary announced that the President was "setting an example" for the nation by flying commercial to California.

As has so often been the case, that was not quite the straight of it. Actually, the President was following the example set for him by millions of Americans who never go any other way.

For the President getting there without the press was half the fun of the "historic first." They are all he has left for enemies now, and their discomfiture weighed as nothing against his re-establishment of himself as a common man travelling by common carrier.

The de-royalization of the presidency comes a bit late in the day, but it is, nonetheless, effective. The constituency of airline passengers is enormous. The President has become one of us.

★ ★ ★

HE HAS GONE to San Clemente. But the fact that he has paid his own way there is a true capital gain for him, and the nation.

He could win it all back in the next week or so. What if, for instance, he goes to the Los Angeles airport and gets into the line at the check-in counter. The consensus might well be that a man who has gone through that has suffered enough and all talk of impeachment could melt with the snow.

I wish he'd gotten in our line at National Airport December 21, when so many of us were trying to beat our way to the Christmas fireside of our choice.

There were only six people in our queue, but we waited 58 minutes. A middle-aged couple were at the counter negotiating a six-stop Caribbean journey for a party of eight. They haggled over the fare of every leg.

Richard Nixon would have been proud of us when we discovered that the couple, who eventually paid their fare from twin rolls of one and ten dollar bills, were not going to board their plane until January 3.

The President's plane was delayed for an hour, which struck a sympathetic chord and made him further kin to a host of holiday travelers. Some accounts said it was because he had such a large group and so much luggage. Others, however, reported that it was because of rain and ground fog. Nobody will cavil about the reason. It happened to him as to other men.

★ ★ ★

THE NEXT STEP for him is to travel tourist and take any seat available. On December 21, when we finally revved up, I found a seat with two friendly little blond sisters from Florida, who were travelling to Boston to meet their father.

The first thing the younger one said to me was, "I'll probably be sick." I was on the way in.

"We're going around the world," she told me. "We're going to New York City and Pennsylvania -- but I don't think China."

What a travelling companion she would have made for the president.

No question about it, when he got on the United DC-10, the President entered a whole new world of possibility and hope.

Washington Star-News