

No Harry? No Walter? No John? No....?

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, Feb. 9—When President Nixon goes to China he will take most of the American television industry with him. Harry Reasoner, Walter Cronkite, John Chancellor, Barbara Walters, Dan Rather, Herb Kaplow, Bernard Kalb, Eric Sevareid and many more. Thirty-five more by precise count, including cameramen and technicians.

Those of us who have to stay at home will not be entirely bereft. The President is leaving Hogan's Heroes behind, and Lucy, and the old prints of "Casablanca." These should help most of us survive the intervals—presumably few—when satellite transmission is not pulsing out of China with the saga of Marco Nixon.

There are a few people, however, who will be in trouble. All those people who are running for President, for example. What's the point of running in the U. S. A. if all the television is over in China?

The same question — "What's the use?"—confronts Congressmen, people who blow up buildings, writers with new books to be flogged—everybody, in short, to whom television exposure is life's blood and mother's milk.

They will probably solve their problem by taking a vacation this time, but a point has been made, a question raised and it requires attention. We already knew that a President could make it very difficult for anyone else to get attention on television, but until the Peking trip we did not realize that he had the power to pack the entire television industry into an airplane and transport it lock, stock and Sevareid out of the country.

This is not entirely due to Presidential power, let it be hurriedly said, but rather a disclosure of how thoroughly absorbed television has become with the Presidency. The President plays the pipe; like the children of Hamelin, the mesmerized networks follow him into—where?

Television is exceedingly Presidential. It is at its best with bold, simple stories about strong men in familiar situations, and this is the kind of story the White House, of all American institutions, is most likely to provide consistently.

The President flying about the earth to engage in pageant diplomacy, like a Tudor king on a royal progress through the realm, provides the spectacle story which television reports incomparably. Presidents, of course, need television as much as television needs Presidents. Television makes the politician's dream come true; with

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it, he can seize the voter directly by the ears, show him his smile, his gravity, the way the muscle bunches with patriotic determination there under the jaw when he is really on his mettle, and all this right in the voter's living room, or bedroom, or cellar.

The press—or "writing press," as it is now occasionally called—declines in importance to Presidents, as the common interest of Presidency and television becomes more manifest.

It seems unlikely, despite the occasional Agnewian assault on the columnists and publications of the wicked East, that anyone in the White House can care much about what goes on any more in print. National triumph nowadays goes to the man who can dominate the illuminated box. Even voters who do read seem not to believe much they see in print.

For the present China trip the White House, nevertheless, allotted half the transportation space to "writing press." In the future we can probably anticipate that the percentage allotted to television will become progressively larger as television becomes increasingly Presidential in its focus and the Presidency becomes increasingly tele-genic and theatrical.

Is the printed page, then, to disappear? Probably not. It has an important role to play in a possible reorganization of society which might result from the marriage of Presidency and television. There will remain, after all, other parts of government requiring public attention—Congress, court, legislature, city hall, police station.

There will almost surely remain a minority who need to know what these institutions are up to. Television, absorbed in piping the Presidency to the great masses, will probably abandon this relatively negligible audience. Ratings, after all, must be respected. Print will be the logical method of conveying information to this minority.

In time we might anticipate a great division—two nations living as one: one of them, living by television, would choose Presidents; the other, still literate, would make most of the small decisions which determine how a country is actually run.

The worst is also possible, of course. This is that Congressmen and judges and governors and mayors and cops will all give up when they see that nobody but a President can get on television. And then we will really have problems when the President flies away.