

## Thorns among the tulips

The journey has been long indeed—300,000 miles, three years, two months and two weeks. It has led through Guam, Vietnam and Thailand, spanned South Asia, included Romania, Yugoslavia, Western Europe and now China. And always Richard Nixon comes back to the Oval Office where he is one man in a speck of this global space. He was there a few days ago, with a mellow afternoon sun splashing in behind his desk chair, answering reporters' questions.

It was almost homelike. Nixon's dogs roamed the corridor outside the office, sniffing each new entry. There was a fire in the fireplace to take the last March chill away, the fragrance of burning hickory filling the room. Beyond, through the tall windows, the South Lawn was a sparkling promise of spring. Yellow tulip tops were poised, the grass green and lifting, magnolia blossoms burgeoning. There was something comforting about the setting, with men and issues so often seen projected too large against history finally returned to common scale. It doesn't happen enough.

Nixon is plainly older. Aging in Presidents comes suddenly, both in the man and the beholder. All at once it is there. Nixon's tan was gone, the lines deeper, skin leathery, a bit of a strained look. There was noticeably more gray in his hair, even in those lengthening sideburns, down a quarter of an inch since last calibrated. Of recent Presidents, Nixon has been most sheltered and rested, yet the marks of time are now clear. The weight of office respects no barriers.

He stood there in the midst of an array of presidential seals. They seemed to form some kind of armor against the outside doubters of the press who had been admitted to this place. There was a seal on his desktape Dictaphone, another in the center of a Steuben glass star on the front of the desk, on a clip which marked his place in a leather notebook. There was a seal on his pen set, one on the ceiling and one woven in the deep blue rug. Behind him there was the big seal in the presidential flag. The seal done in crewel by Julie was on a far wall.

The President was engaging in one of the rituals of power that is plainly a chore to him—answering questions. And in contrast to all those international spectacles and triumphs on which he loves to dwell, the questions, now, as he no doubt anticipated they would, focused

on the grubby details of ITT, Ambassador Arthur Watson's behavior, campaign contributions, busing and the rebellious George Meany. No matter how exalted a President's touring, such thorns always lurk among the tulips when he returns.

There was the faint edge of irritation in his voice. He talked into the clean, gleaming desk-top as if it were a slate on which he had arranged his words and his thoughts. Reaching behind, he kneaded the back of his leather chair with his hands. For some reason they seemed larger than one remembered. Now and then he poked the air with his fingers, or held them up and ticked them as he made his points. There was something of the fighter in these short, abrupt movements. He seemed to be looking for a hold on the enemy. Just then, perhaps, it was the 75 reporters in front of him, who represented a kind of invisible disruptive force determined to distract attention from his overseas success. He found the hold, brought his eyes up and gave his voice a triumphant tone: "I would hope the members of the press would report this, because I have not seen this in many stories—it is significant to note that ITT became the great conglomerate that it was in the two previous administrations, primarily the Kennedy administration and the Johnson administration. It grew and grew, and nothing was done to stop it. . . . We moved on ITT."

It was a meticulously planned political gambit, a way around the thorns. But the reporters would not let ITT die. Nixon's jaw got hard and his eyes took on a brittle glint. Sternly: "Mr. Ziegler responded to that question and I will not respond further." And politics? "I will not answer political questions," said the slightly aggrieved President of all the people, Republicans and Democrats.

In the far end of the Oval Office aide Bob Haldeman lounged in front of the fire, a yellow legal pad on his knee, taking notes of questions and answers, his eyes darting laserlike glances over the backs of the newsmen. He was scorekeeper, toting up the friendlies and the unfriendlies. Nixon on his side of the desk was backed up by a bust of Abraham Lincoln, a medal of Dwight Eisenhower, a color picture of the three Nixon women, a photograph of the Unknown Soldier's tomb.

It was work for Nixon. His hands chopped up and down. There was body English and

doubled fists when he talked about his opposition to busing and "the critical mass" approach (concentrating money in deprived areas) to better education. His upper lip began to perspire. Two reporters tried to wedge in questions, but his eyes were locked on the top of his desk and so was his mind and he raced on, a man alone even in the crowded room. There was relief only with the few questions about foreign policy. His head came up and he became the great conductor, sweeping the horizon with his arms, forming globes



in the air with his hands, showing for the first time a touch of real joy in his national stewardship.

When it was all over he folded his hands just as he might have after pronouncing a benediction. The journalists filed out silently. Nixon sat down in his chair, turned toward the windows that look out into the Rose Garden and rested his chin on an index finger, pondering. Older, yes, troubled, yes. But going ahead, too, ready for the next encounter, a President.