

Nixon Flight Surprised FAA

San Clemente

President Nixon believes his surprise commercial airline flight across the continent was a successful "symbolic gesture during the energy crisis," an aide said yesterday.

But the Wednesday night trip from Washington to Los Angeles on a regularly scheduled jumbo jet — the first such flight ever by a President while in office — created some controversy within the administration.

As Mr. Nixon began a week-long working vacation at his oceanfront villa here, Federal Aviation Administrator Alexander Butterfield noted in Washington that his agency wasn't given its usual advance notice of the President's flight plans.

"This serious oversight left precious little time for our air traffic people to implement those special precautionary procedures which must always be followed when the President takes to the air lanes," Butterfield said.

White House Press Secretary Ronald L. Ziegler declined to respond specifically to Butterfield's comment, but said the number of persons told of the President's plans was kept to a minimum for security reasons.

The FAA apparently was not notified until about the time the United Air Lines DC-10 took off in fog and rain from Dulles Airport near Washington.

Air traffic controllers then instituted special procedures normally followed when the President is airborne, closely tracking

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the plane by radar as it crossed the country on the five-hour flight.

Ziegler, one of about ten White House staffers who flew with Mr. Nixon in the plane's first-class compartment, said Mr. Nixon gave instructions "that he wanted to be treated like every other passenger . . . just like an ordinary citizen with no extras."

He said the President had the same meal as other passengers — rib eye beef — as

he sat with Mrs. Nixon, daughter Tricia Cox and his aides in the forward part of the plane. Nearby was a so-called "suitcase satellite," a portable but highly sophisticated communications package he and his assistants used during the flight to stay in touch with the White House.

At one point, Mr. Nixon strolled through the aisles of the wide-bodied plane, shaking hands with many of the 107 regular passengers aboard.

"I think the President enjoyed himself, Ziegler said. "It was a friendly flight."

The trip proved, Ziegler said, that a President can fly "smoothly, safely and comfortably" aboard a commercial plane. But he would not say whether Mr. Nixon would return to Washington after New Year's on a commercial craft.

"He wanted to show his confidence in commercial air travel," the spokesman said, and make a "symbolic gesture" during the energy crisis when he is urging Americans to conserve fuel.

Newsmen were not told of Mr. Nixon's trip until he was ready to take off from the airport in the Virginia countryside 20 miles from Washington. He had been driven there secretly in an unmarked sedan.

No newsmen were aboard the jumbo jet, not even the small "press pool" of between two and seven correspondents who customarily fly aboard the Presidential jet. Ziegler said the press pool was left behind "primarily because of the matter of security." However, White House sources have said that Mr. Nixon has shown increasing irritation at finding newsmen nearby whenever he ventures into public.

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