

Houston — The President Is Coming, Ho-Hum, Ho-Hum, Ho-Hum

By Molly Ivins

HOUSTON—President Nixon arrives today to visit "Baghdad on the Bayou" and there are a few billboards up around town that say, "Welcome to Houston, President Nixon." They were paid for by Metromedia, Inc., which is headquartered in New York City.

Mr. Nixon is coming to address the 52d annual convention of the National Association of Broadcasters but is otherwise ignoring the country's sixth-largest city. Houston seems to be prepared to return the favor.

An utterly unscientific survey of Houstonians who were out enjoying the sunny Sunday at the Houston Zoo found no one who was in the least interested in turning out either to welcome the President or to demonstrate against him. Which is just as well, since he hasn't scheduled any public appearances here.

Both those Houstonians who support the President and those who would like to see him leave office at once said they were "too busy" to make their feelings known in person, even if such an opportunity was available.

Houston is always a busy place—

busy making money. It's been a boom town for 20 years now. During the recession of 1969, when unemployment nationally hit 7 per cent, it never got over 3 per cent in Houston. And there are no signs that Houston is slowing down now.

A Houston writer, Al Reinert, calls this "a city of Snopeses." It's a brassy, fast-buck place, a whisky-and-trom-bone town. It is spreading out across the table-top flat Gulf plain like a cancer going berserk.

It's a conservative city in a conservative state, but its politics are not easy to pigeonhole. The Houston delegation to the state Legislature provides the bulk of both the Republicans and the liberals in Austin. In 1972, Houston voted for both Richard M. Nixon and Frances Paretthold, the liberal gubernatorial candidate. And at the end of last year, the city simultaneously elected its first liberal mayor and an extremely conservative school board.

Local political observers from all points on the ideological spectrum confirmed the results of the zoo survey of Sunday—a 40-60 split between the pro-Nixon and anti-Nixon sentiment, with feelings not running particularly high on either side.

The blacks, 30 per cent of the city's

population, are almost unanimously anti-Nixon, but then they never liked him before Watergate either.

Chicanos, 10 per cent of the population, tended to support him. Chicanos traditionally vote Democratic and they are strongly attached to the memories of both dead Kennedy brothers. But Chicanos also tend to be vocally patriotic and particularly proud of their military service.

Chicano fathers ask one another, "Has your boy done his service yet?"

Several of them expressed the feeling that being against the President was like being against the country. But Leonel Castillo, the city's Chicano controller, pointed out that every elected Mexican-American official in Houston has come out for impeachment.

Among the citizens who supported Mr. Nixon in 1972 and now say they would not do it again, the greatest bitterness expressed was not about Watergate, but about the President's tax situation. Over and over one heard people say that they had been cheated or that the President had cheated.

The dissatisfaction came out most frequently as antipathy or disappointment rather than as strong anger. There was considerable griping about high prices. Among members of the downtown

Establishment — businessmen and lawyers—most of them seemed to have counted out Mr. Nixon some time ago. Their feeling seemed to congeal at about the time that Leon Jaworski, a Houston attorney, was appointed special Watergate prosecutor to succeed Archibald Cox.

Houstonians may be atypically, for Texans, conscious of Watergate, since the few papers here have followed the story fairly closely. In particular The Houston Chronicle, although it has done no original digging on the story, has a wide range of news agencies at its disposal, and has consistently given the story front-page play.

This is in contrast to Dallas, where the two papers seem to have concluded, at least editorially, that the whole mess is largely the result of an Eastern media conspiracy against the President.

One element that seems to have disappeared is the extreme reactionary politics for which this city was once notorious. Ten years ago, extreme right-wingers were a prominent feature of Houston political life. The John Birch Society was big here and several fundamentalist Protestant churches were involved in right-wing politics.

But as the city has grown, it has received an influx of Yankees, many of them college-educated employees in the corporate headquarters of the big oil companies.

The new Mayor, Fred Hofheinz, son of Judge Roy Hofheinz who built the Astrodome, put together a coalition of moderate-liberal whites with a heavy black vote to squeak through a run-off race in December.

The gasoline shortage has not been particularly serious here, although Houston is almost as dominated by freeway as Los Angeles. There have been few, if any, gas lines, although it is sometimes necessary to scrounge around a bit in order to find a station with operating pumps. There are more Cadillacs and pick-up trucks on the freeways here than one is likely to see in other parts of the country, and some of those have a bumper sticker that reads, "Let the Yankee bastards freeze." Texas chauvinism is alive and well in Houston.

All in all, this is not an angry city—it's just not enthusiastic about Richard M. Nixon.

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'Baghdad on the Bayou'

