

The President's Trip: New Policy Abroad...

JUN 11 1974

PRESIDENT NIXON arrives in Cairo Wednesday on the first leg of a trip that skeptics believe is a diplomatically unnecessary if not mischievous journey launched to bolster his anti-impeachment claim that he is indispensable to world peace. From that jaundiced view, we dissent. Mr. Nixon may indeed have obvious political purposes—in connection with the impeachment process now unfolding—in becoming the first President (except for FDR's wartime trip to Cairo) to visit not only Egypt but Saudi Arabia, Syria, Israel and Jordan—in that order. And he has already made clear, from the attendant fanfare, that he intends to make the most of it, politically. But there are important and legitimate foreign-policy purposes to be served as well.

His mission lets Mr. Nixon do a lot more than personally associate himself with the Israeli-Egyptian and Israeli-Syrian disengagement accords. Barring mishaps, it should help consolidate the great improvement in American standing in the Arab world of the past nine months. The President brought about this improvement by supporting Israel firmly in the October war and thus convincing Arabs he was a serious man, and then by demonstrating he understood the Arabs' desire to regain their lost territory and to focus on economic development. Mr. Nixon showed he realized that only by friendship with Arabs as well as Israelis could the United States, at once, work toward a Mideast political settlement, limit the spread of Soviet power in the region and try to assure a steady flow of Arab oil. So it happens now that on the Arab side Mr. Nixon will be roundly hailed where he and most other American leaders were being reviled only a short time ago.

On the eve of his trip he received in Washington the Saudi Arabian heir-apparent, who signed economic and military "cooperation" agreements. The agreements express the United States' need for good relations with the state having the world's largest oil and cash reserves and Saudi Arabia's need for American technology, development aid, political patronage and arms. The public smiles cloak a relationship of sheer expediency: the values which the two nations celebrate could hardly be more diverse. Mr. Nixon's cultivation of Saudi oil also cuts directly across his announced Project Independence. But the American interest in cooperating with Saudi Arabia in mutually functional ways, at least in the short term, is very strong.

In Egypt, Mr. Nixon will be greeted by a leader, President Sadat, who has bet his political life that, in return for Egyptian moderation, the United States will press Israel to withdraw back to the 1967 line and will help Egypt rebuild and tackle its massive poverty. Before 1973, Mr. Sadat tried to achieve these aims by relying on Moscow. The war and its aftermath led him to turn to Washington. By his presence, President Nixon symbolizes and advances this change, whose significance to the United States is hard to overstate. In Syria, Mr. Nixon will be encountering a country which is taking its first very tentative steps along the accommodation path pioneered by Egypt. In Jordan, he will be dealing with an old and reliable, but nervous, American dependency.

Mr. Nixon will find Israel in the double throes of organizing a new government and preparing politically and psychologically to cope with the first chance for peace with its neighbors in its 26 years as a state. It will be his difficult task to assure Israel of the United States' continuing friendship and to coax it toward a regional settlement, at the same time. The new Israeli prime minister, Mr. Rabin, is himself a practiced Washington hand whose close ties with the President and the Secretary of State should help the two sides work out American-Israeli relations in a way consistent with old loyalties and new imperatives alike.

Five countries in six days means fast going, with little enough chance for communication and none for real negotiation. In that sense, Mr. Nixon's trip is ceremonial. But especially in the Mideast, ceremony itself can be substantive. That an American President can make such a tour signifies the new American position in the region and the new American possibilities—and pitfalls—in diplomacy and in economic and political affairs. The tour should also enhance the President's general bargaining position when he goes to Moscow barely a week after his return. So there is sound diplomatic justification for a presidential tour of the Mideast, however hastily it may have been planned and whatever the President may do to exploit it for his own domestic political gain. For all the overblown—and overworked—rhetoric about peacemaking and the rest, the fact is that Mr. Nixon did a great deal to improve the situation in the Mideast and to make it possible to make the trip at all.