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China Trip Defended By Nixon

NEW YORK, Feb. 9 — Former President Nixon says he is going to China as a private citizen later this month because U.S. ties with China are even more important today than when he made his trail-blazing trip to Peking four years ago.

In a statement given to former Nixon speechwriter and now New York Times columnist William Safire, published in Safire's column today, Mr. Nixon said:

"In 1972, I went to the People's Republic of China because I concluded that a new and constructive relationship between the U.S. and the P.R.C. is indispensable if we are to have lasting peace in the Pacific and in the world.

"I believe that this relationship is, if anything, more important today than it was four years ago. I look forward to the opportunity of seeing again the leaders and the people of the P.R.C."

In a phrase taken by observers to dispel notions that he might become active in this year's Presidential election, Mr. Nixon added: "When I return, I will be spending my time in San Clemente completing work on my memoirs."

Although President Ford traveled to Peking last December, Mr. Nixon will be the first prominent Westerner to go there since the surprise announcement that Security Minister Hua Kuo-Feng had been named acting premier to succeed the late Chou En-lai.

The White House has tried to dissociate Mr. Ford from the Nixon trip by saying that the former President is only one of thousands of Americans who have gone to China in recent years. But privately, presidential aides have expressed dismay over Mr. Nixon's trip just at the start of Mr. Ford's efforts to capture the 1976 Republican presidential nomination.

Some observers believe that the re-emergence of Mr. Nixon after the Watergate scandal could rekindle memories of a Republican White House wracked by scandal — and torpedo Mr. Ford's efforts to recast the presidential image in the candid, man-next-door mold.