

The Chinese Key: II

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By William Safire

WASHINGTON — Why is Richard Nixon returning to Peking?

In a carefully drawn answer to that question, he has given me this statement:

"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," continues Mr. Nixon, "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."

The former President added: "When I return, I will be spending time in San Clemente completing work on my memoirs."

That's all I have, or anybody has, from Mr. Nixon; now to my own speculation.

Why is he returning? An Antarctic explorer, who had also been asked that question, put his answer in the name of his ship: *Pourquoi Pas?* Why not? Mr. Nixon's China summit was the high point of his life—what could be more natural than to want to relive those halcyon days? He's a private citizen, and 8,000 other private American citizens have been to China since he led the way.

But he happens to be the only private citizen who is also a former President. No matter what he says about this being a fourth anniversary (since when do we make a big deal out of a fourth anniversary?) or what Mr. Ford's spokesman has to say about "no significance" being attached to the invitation, the Chinese interest in the deposed American President is profoundly significant. The announcements within 24 hours of Mr. Nixon's visit and the appointment of a new prime minister cannot be happenstance.

That Chinese interest in their Nixon connection was expressed in an invitation to return first carried to him in a Long Beach hospital in November 1974, by Imelda Marcos, wife of the President of the Philippines. The invitation was repeated a dozen times in different ways: Last summer, I found myself seated at a dinner next to Huang Chen, China's chief liaison officer, who knew that I had once been a Nixon speech-writer, and he pointedly asked me to pass on China's interest in a return visit.

To all those feelers, Mr. Nixon cited his health as a delaying factor, but generally let it be understood that 1977 would be the year. The American election would be over, the Nixon book would be coming out, the intensity

of feeling about him would have been reduced, and then the time would be ripe. The recent trip by Julie and David Eisenhower to China was to have been "this year's trip."

But the Chinese leaders evidently felt their timing could not wait upon American elections. With Chou's death, and with Mao's advancing age, a sense of urgency appeared. Mao and his followers wanted to assert the anti-Soviet line that incorporated the opening to the West that Mr. Nixon symbolized; an opposing faction wants reconciliation with the Soviet Union. In the provinces, the anti-Soviet line remains pronounced; in Peking, it has already become muted.

The behind-the-scenes power struggle must be fierce. Mao and his Long March comrade, Huang Chen (who escorted Julie and David around China last month), undoubtedly want to put an imprint on the succession that will make China independent of the Soviet Union's "impure" Communism.

It is my guess that Richard Nixon is willingly lending himself to this goal: That's what can be read into

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his statement that "this relationship is, if anything, more important today than it was four years ago."

By bringing Mr. Nixon over now, Chairman Mao forced the choice of a "temporary" prime minister to succeed Chou En-lai. That man—Hua Kuo-feng—will have as his first public act the greeting of the symbol of China's independence from the Soviet Union.

Careful readers of this space will exclaim: "Aha! Hua Kuo-feng! He was the one you predicted in your office-pool column would succeed Chou, when everybody else was touting Teng Hsiao-ping — you got this tip from your old boss." Not true. My source was Joseph Leliveld, former Hong Kong correspondent of The New York Times and now a member of its Washington bureau, who was the only one to say a month ago that Hua was a logical "dark horse" candidate, and I like to bet on dark horses.

Our central concern, then, ought not be whether Richard Nixon deserves to be permitted back on the world stage, or whether he represents anyone but himself. He goes not to conduct diplomacy, but to act as a symbol.

To Mao and his followers, the Nixon symbol is necessary now to affirm the wisdom of separation from the Soviet Union; to Americans, the Nixon symbol in foreign affairs is needed to hold on to the Chinese key, which our next elected leader can use to unlock the door to a new détente.

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