

Why Nixon Is Going to China

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Why is Richard Nixon returning to Peking?

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In a carefully-drawn answer to that question, Nixon 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 PRC is indispensable if we are to have lasting peace in the Pacific and in the world.

"I believe," continues 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 PRC."

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 Nixon; now to my own speculation.

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 8000 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 or what President 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.

That Chinese interest in their Nixon connection was expressed in an invitation to return was first carried to him in a Long Beach hospital in November, 1974, by Imelda Marcos, wife of the President of the Philippines.

The invitation has been repeated a dozen times in different ways.

To all those feelers, 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.

But the Chinese leaders evidently felt their timing could not wait upon American elections. With Chou En-lai's death, and with Mao Tse-tung'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 Nixon symbolized; an opposing faction wants reconciliation with the Sovi-

ets. In the provinces, the anti-Soviet line remains pronounced; in Peking, it has already become muted.

The behind-the-scenes upheaval must be fierce. Mao and his Long March comrade, Huang Chen 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 his statement that "this relationship is, if anything, more important today than it was four years ago."

By bringing Nixon to China now, Mao forced the choice of a "temporary" premier 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.

Our central concern, then, ought not to 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 assert a symbol.

To Mao and his followers, the Nixon symbol is necessary now to affirm the wisdom of separation from the Soviets; 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 detente.

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