

Nixon China Trip Viewed As Embarrassing for Ford

NYTimes

FEB 21 1976

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Special to The New York Times

PORTSMOUTH, N.H., Feb. 20 —Former President Richard M. Nixon's departure on a visit to China today has forced to the surface an awkward issue that President Ford had been hoping to avoid in his close and possibly crucial contest with Ronald Reagan in the New Hampshire Republican primary.

Mr. Ford boarded his Air Force jet this afternoon to return to Washington after his final campaign trip to New Hampshire.

And about three hours earlier, Mr. Nixon had boarded a Chinese plane in Los Angeles on a visit that, as White House and Ford campaign aides had feared, has revived lingering questions and resentments about Mr. Ford's pardon of his predecessor 18 months ago.

"Maybe," said one Ford associate wistfully, "New Hampshire Republicans will sympathize with the President because Nixon jobbed him."

But the more likely expectation, widely shared and generally resented among Mr. Ford's campaign workers, was that Mr. Nixon's new visit to Peking would do more harm than good to the Ford candidacy at a time when it could ill afford a setback. They observed that the inclusion in the former President's party of 20 journalists all but guaranteed that the Peking visit would be beamed back to New Hampshire television viewers in the three days before the primary vote.

The re-emergence of the "Nixon connection" was illustrated vividly when Mr. Ford answered questions last night in the Keene High School gymnasium from residents of the city.

A young man rose to remind Mr. Ford that he had character-

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ized Mr. Nixon's trip as merely another of some 10,000 to China by American private citizens. If so, the young man asked, why was it that 18 months earlier Mr. Ford had not treated Mr. Nixon "as any other American and have him face criminal charges in the same way as any other American would, instead of pardoning him?"

In the hush that followed the question, Mr. Ford repeated his contention that the only way to erase the Watergate "problem" from the nation's focus and concentrate on economic and diplomatic issues was to grant the pardon.

And, with a trace of asperity, Mr. Ford said:

"As far as penalty is concerned, the former President obviously resigned in disgrace. That is a pretty severe penalty. One out of 37 Presidents had that happen to him."

If the remark was meant to indicate both his irritation over the China trip and a desire to dissociate himself from his predecessor, it was far from clear that Mr. Ford had succeeded.

Three subsequent questioners among the 19 in the high-school gym asked Mr. Ford if the visit did not portend a "deterioration" of relations between Washington and Peking? "They are going to continue to be good," he replied; what happened to our friends in Taiwan? ("We are going to stick by them"); and why Mr. Ford had pardoned Mr. Nixon after suggesting to Congress he would not ("I thought it was right at the time and for good reasons—period.")

Mr. Nixon's journey posed foreign policy implications, not least among them the fact that, at a time when Mr. Ford is defending his policy of détente against Mr. Reagan's criticism, he is taking an arm's-length attitude toward Mr. Nixon, who may return from China with the most authoritative reading of the leadership struggle there.

Western foreign policy specialists have concluded that the Chinese wanted to use the fourth anniversary of Mr. Nixon's first visit to China in 1972 to emphasize Peking's desire to prod Washington to move ahead with normalization of relations and to ease its ties with Taiwan.

The timing of the Chinese invitation—and Mr. Nixon's willingness to give the visit full press publicity—is presumed an embarrassment not only to President Ford but also to the Soviet leadership as it moves into the 25th Communist Party Congress on Tuesday.

Moscow has been careful to

give no public hint that the Soviet Party leader, Leonid I. Brezhnev, may find it awkward to have Mr. Nixon, his former partner in détente, visiting the Soviet arch-rivals in China at the very time that Mr. Brezhnev is receiving renewed endorsement of Soviet détente policy from the assembled hierarchy of Soviet communism.

Privately, American diplomats in Moscow have reported, the Russians seem more puzzled than disturbed by the Nixon visit because they reason that Mr. Nixon is not empowered to handle any negotiations. American press criticism of the trip, these diplomats said, has struck some sophisticated Russians as an unexpected bonus because they hope it may cause Americans to question Chinese motives.

Political Fallout

Of more immediate concern to Mr. Ford and his aides, however, was the domestic political fallout of the Nixon trip.

The ultimate irony, suggested one member of Mr. Ford's party here, would be if Mr. Nixon, having been the one to make Mr. Ford the President, proved in the New Hampshire voting to be the one who unmade Mr. Ford's candidacy for a full term.

Although no one here described the Nixon journey as a major campaign element, several Ford associates said that it was a nettlesome enough issue that, given the forecasts of a close contest, would contribute to tipping the balance to Mr. Reagan in New Hampshire.

Various newspapers in the state have reproduced editorial cartoons that drew attention to the trip and to its possible effect on Mr. Ford in one cartoon, a caricature of Mr. Nixon stepped on Mr. Ford's toe while carrying a suitcase bearing the words, "To China."

The Manchester Union leader, the state's largest daily newspaper and a staunch supporter of Mr. Reagan, has carried three editorials on the Nixon trip since it was announced by Peking two weeks ago. One editorial described it as a "miserable way" for Mr. Nixon to repay Mr. Ford for the pardon.

One Ford operative here conceded today that it was difficult to ignore the fact that "Nixon's trip revives memories of the pardon, and that's a problem."

The aide said it was a no-win issue because, while some voters might resent the pardon, others, viewed as conservatives, still seemed to believe Mr. Nixon "got a raw deal" from Watergate.