

In the words and pictures flowing out of China these days, Richard M. Nixon looks for all the world like a private traveler impersonating an American President. Everything about that trip is mischievous.

In trying to regain a position of political influence, Mr. Nixon has allowed the rulers of the People's Republic of China to use him to undercut some of the views and policies of the Ford Administration which they resent. The appearance of the deposed President at what have clearly been staged as top-level banquets and meetings is deliberately designed to suggest that he speaks with an authority that transcends a nostalgic return to the site of former glory.

Perhaps the Chinese part in this performance of shockingly bad taste can be rationalized on the ground that Peking is genuinely ignorant of the American people's perception of legitimate leadership. Those who planned this visit may simply not understand that the events that forced Mr. Nixon's resignation have deprived him of any claim to even the ceremonial role of former President.

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It is because the normalization of relations with China, set in motion four years ago through Mr. Nixon's admirable initiative, continues to be so crucial to the national interest and to world peace that this diplomatic misadventure is so deplorable. Peking's misuse of Mr. Nixon, to which the former President has willingly lent himself, does little to advance future negotiations with the only authorized representatives of the American people—the legitimate spokesmen of the United States Government. What would Chinese officialdom think if the White House engineered a journey to the United States by Teng Hsiao-ping (on the assumption he could be found) as a means of administering a public rebuke to the present regime?

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If some of the subtleties of American representative government may be alien to China's rulers, they are surely understood by their guest. After a lifetime spent in American politics, Mr. Nixon knows that his trip amounts to nothing less than complicity in Peking's obvious efforts to underscore its disagreements with the Ford Administration, particularly over American relations with the Soviet Union; and even perhaps to intrude into American domestic politics on the eve of today's New Hampshire primaries.

It is regrettable that Mr. Nixon's insensitivity toward such matters appears to have been given some semblance of propriety by Secretary of State Kissinger's misguided invitation to Mr. Nixon to brief American officials on his experiences—in contradiction of President Ford's previous and entirely proper rejection of such an elevation of Citizen Nixon to official rapporteur.

The American people have made it unmistakably clear that they no longer wish to be represented by Mr. Nixon, in Washington—or in Peking.