

Revival Meeting Tonight For Clinton the Populist

By RICHARD L. BERKE,
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SOUTHFIELD, Mich., Feb. 9— Seeking to re-establish his credentials as a populist, President Clinton will travel here on Wednesday to revive a popular event from last year's campaign that he wants to make a staple of the modern Presidency: the televised town meeting.

Mr. Clinton will answer questions from audiences picked by WXYZ, the ABC affiliate that is staging the event in this Detroit suburb, and satellite-linked stations in Miami, Atlanta and Seattle that will participate.

To get here, Mr. Clinton will take his first trip on Air Force One, a Boeing 747 that is one of the most daunting symbols of the Commander in Chief. But Mr. Clinton is determined to mold the hourlong event into a festival of populist imagery, and that is why the White House and the television station are already quarreling about the President's chair.

Mr. Clinton's advisers insisted that the President use a simple wooden stool, not the one with celery-green upholstery that the station offered. They wanted the kind a working-class guy in the Rust Belt would pull up to the bar when his shift is over. Measure of Control

The dispute illustrates another aspect of what Mr. Clinton has said will be a permanent campaign to sell his programs to the country: the extraordinary measures his media advisers will take to control the presentation of the President and to bypass the filter of White House reporters asking uncomfortable questions.

After Mr. Clinton speaks here, Vice President Al Gore will hold a similar event in Ontario, Calif., for people in the Western states who do not get home in time to see the President. On Thursday, Hillary Rodham Clinton will make the first of several trips to promote her plans for the nation's health-care system; she will travel to Pennsylvania, where health care as a hot national issue was born in Senator Harris Wofford's 1991 campaign.











But before the policy debate begins, there are important, though small, details to consider, like the color of the set here. The White House wants "Presidential blue," and lacking guidance on exactly what hue that is, the station has come up with a sky blue, faux marble backdrop. And the stool.

"What I picked out wasn't extravagant," protested Diane Fiolek-Mandel, the design director for WXYZ, as she stood today amid workers building the set for Wednesday night. "But they insisted that we don't use it. What they wanted was a very, very plain stool. Go figure. I think they're so wrapped up in the Presidential image." White House Says, No Fuss

Jeff Eller, the White House director of media affairs, insisted that there was no fuss about the upholstered stool. "I don't want to get into a stool argument," he said. "This is not a

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huge sticking point for the future of the town hall."

Recalling Mr. Clinton's participation at a town meeting here in the campaign in September, Mr. Eller said: "They had a stool last time that was very uncomfortable. And it was too short. Clinton likes to sit on the edge of a stool, and a plain wooden bar stool is perfect.

Ms. Fiolek-Mandel said the attitudes of the Clinton people had changed. "They're a lot more picky now," she said. "Their attitude is different. This time, everyone says, 'He's the President now.' Before, they were a lot looser."

The net effect is the same: Mr. Clinton could not buy better publicity. Beyond the stations involved in the town meeting, it will be broadcast nationally by CNN, C-Span and National Public Radio; 17 stations around the country say they will drop their regular programming to broadcast it live. The meeting begins at 8 P.M. Eastern time, and the questions will be asked from city-to-city in a round-robin fashion, with local newscasters as moderators.

White House officials said they hoped the heavy coverage would help Mr. Clinton enlist public support for the economic plan he is preparing. While they said they would not review the questions in advance, the officials are clearly betting that local citizens will ask fewer questions than reporters would on matters like Judge Kimba M. Wood, Zoe Baird and homosexuals in the military.

Chuck Stokes, the editorial and public affairs director for WXYZ, said he picked the 60 people who will sit in the studio here with Mr. Clinton out of as many as 1,000 people who suggested questions in calls or faxes.

"Every one we selected had good questions related to topics that are in the news," Mr. Stokes said. "There may be a surprise or two but nothing out of left field, and nothing that Bill Clinton couldn't handle."

And the stool? Ms. Fiolek-Mandel vowed to resist White House pleas for a more populist perch for the President.

"This is the one I'm putting out," she said, pointing to the stool the White House rejected. "And until someone says differently, this is the one we'll use. I'll probably lose, but I'm going for the fight."

Photo: Diane Fioek-Mandel and Don Ritter of WXYZ have found the set for a populist President demands a simple wooden stool, not an upholstered chair. (Peter Yates for The New York Times)

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