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Our Secretive President

PRESIDENT NIXON has informed the nation through his chief domestic aide that confidentiality is a cornerstone of his "era of negotiation," and in private the President has given even greater stress to his desire for absolute secrecy in the negotiations with the rulers of China, the Soviet Union and other nations.

Certainly there is no great reason for surprise. By personality as well as policy, Mr. Nixon is a remote and secret man. Unlike President Johnson—who also loved secrets but who could not resist telling everyone about them—Mr. Nixon has a rather simple method for keeping things close to his chest. He thinks alone and decides alone, and lets others know the upshot only when this can no longer be avoided.

A policy of secrecy has its uses for a President in both the international and the domestic fields—up to a point. Mr. Nixon's problem as President has been rather the reverse of what his recent utterances might imply. His essential difficulty has not been with confidentiality, but with communication.

Because he is an introvert —an extremely rare trait in a successful American politician—he does not relate easily to those around him. Despite legions of public relations men high in the councils of the administration, his policies and purposes are poorly understood. Neither the Congress nor the country —to say nothing of men in other lands—can easily grasp what he is thinking or doing.

RATHER THAN informing others what he is about, Mr. Nixon's preferred technique has been a careful process of secret consideration and decision capped by a sudden, dramatic announcement. Sometimes the country has been shocked, as in the case of the U.S. invasion of the Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia. In other cases the lack of public preparation has detracted from the impact of the announcement. Mr. Nixon's massive 1971 legislative program—the "New American Revolution" — was discounted in Congress because no one had been consulted in advance, and discounted in the country because it sounded too big to be true.

The two most recent surprises were the joint Nixon-Soviet announcement of impending progress in the strategic armaments limitation talks and the joint Nixon-Chinese announcement of the impending presidential trip to Peking. Each time, there was a brief and dramatic statement on television, holding forth promise of a new age of peace, and a quick fadeout to silence.

In a government of checks and balances, of divided powers and divided opinion, the President sooner or later will have to tell the country more.

IN THE EARLY phases of his career, Mr. Nixon was in trouble for saying too much, but in recent years he has been the master of the moratorium, the self-imposed veil of silence to obscure his position on tough problems. He said virtually nothing during most of 1967, letting his rivals for the GOP nomination tangle themselves in their own syntax. In 1968, he had a variety of reasons for saying nothing about Vietnam.

Today he has put a moratorium on all discussion of politics. Beyond slogans of great expectation and the tantalizing hints, he is saying little of substance about Vietnam, China or SALT. His round of talks with economic advisers about prices and jobs, and with the Pentagon chiefs about big military programs ahead, are secret. Quite a large number of his meetings with aides and outsiders are not announced. "The President is working in his office" or "meeting with staff members" is the only disclosure.

Given the President's penchant for secrecy, there seems little chance that he or his associates will tell too much about the intimate details of negotiations in progress. Nobody suggests he should suddenly throw open the safe in the White House basement. If the system of classifying and keeping secret papers needs an overhaul—and it certainly does—he is wise to make a study and order action.

The main danger, though, is not too much information but too little. The Vietnam tragedy is a lesson in the pitfalls of government-by-stealth. It proved anew that public confidence and support at home is fundamental to the long-term success of policies abroad.

Despite the trappings of royalty, presidents are not monarchs. They cannot legislate in private, wave a wand and will it so. In the end, they must persuade. And to persuade they must inform.