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The 'Pulpit' Magnified

IN THE NATION

By Tom Wicker

President Ford has set a notable example, and taken a long step toward an "open Presidency" by his appearance before a Congressional subcommittee—a precedent that may have much meaning for the future. But just two days before, Mr. Ford had demonstrated the extent to which Presidential "powers" are still unchecked and may be subject to political abuse.

Mr. Ford had announced his intention to speak on what American citizens "individually and collectively" could do to fight inflation and conserve energy. The national television network news divisions decided that the address would have little news value and none of them scheduled live coverage for Mr. Ford's appearance before a Future Farmers of America meeting in Kansas City. But Mr. Ford refused to accept that judgment and made formal request of the networks that they broadcast his speech in the prime evening hours.

This was amateurish of the White House, for at least two reasons. One was that prime time on the National Broadcasting Company's network was occupied by the third game of the World Series, a sporting event many Americans do not take lightly. The other was that, as the network news executives had suspected, Mr. Ford did not have much to say; after the fuss he had made about obtaining time, his appearance was at best an anticlimax, at worst an annoyance to baseball fans. Advising Americans to plant vegetable gardens, seek bargains and drive slowly is a poor substitute even for Joe Garagiola, let alone Catfish Hunter.

But aside from these White House fumbles, the plain fact is that the President was able to demand and get time from the networks, blanket all three of them for a period in the prime viewing hours, and impose what he had to say on the nation, even though able and experienced news executives, acting separately, had determined in advance that he had little to say that was newsworthy.

Mr. Ford was able to do this, moreover, just three weeks to the day before a national election that he has been describing as of critical importance to the survival of the Republican party. Even though his speech was relatively innocuous—even though it might have cost him some of the baseball vote—his appearance may well have had good political impact for Republicans either in its net effect or in particular localities. And it could

have been an openly political speech, had Mr. Ford chosen to make it so.

This is a Presidential "power" that no one wrote into the Constitution, or even "implied" in that document, and that had not been adequately studied or considered by Congress, the Federal Communications Commission or anyone else. It is the power to command a vast audience almost at will, and to appear before that audience in all the impressive roles a President can play—from manager of the economy to Commander in Chief.

This "power" raises two problems of considerable gravity. It obviously gives a President (of either party) an enormous advantage over his political opposition, as well as over the other branches and institutions of government, in molding public opinion. It magnifies a thousand-fold what Theodore Roosevelt, long before television, called the "bully pulpit" of the Presidency.

If a President can command the airwaves almost at will, moreover, broadcast journalism never will be able to reach the independence and equal constitutional status with print journalism that it deserves, and that the people are entitled to expect of it. Presidents can't command this or any other newspaper to carry the texts of their speeches; and they should not be able to command the networks to broadcast their speeches.

The best remedy would be for network news executives to exercise rigorous news judgment on every Presidential attempt to use the airwaves, and to reject all such attempts that in their news judgment are unworthy. Practically speaking, however, it is not easy for the networks to turn down a President who wants to go on the air, particularly if he says he intends to speak on "national security" matters. Nor is it easy to ascertain in advance if such a claim is valid. Repeated, apparently concerted refusals by the networks would run the risk either of antitrust questions or Agnew-like charges of a press conspiracy, or both.

Automatic assignment of equal time to the opposition works well in Britain, balancing a Prime Minister's ability to shape public opinion and causing him to consider whether his own appearance is worth providing a similar opportunity for the leader of the opposition. But there is no recognized leader of the opposition here, and no guarantee that the opposition party will control Congress, as it does now.

Mr. Ford's transgression and the networks' acquiescence in it were of no great importance; but the incident shows what could happen, which is why broadcast journalism, members of Congress and anyone wary of unchecked power ought to give the matter serious thought.