

NYTimes

FEB 2 1973

Promise of Access

In an Administration that makes a fetish of secrecy, any hint of greater openness is welcome. Thus, when President Nixon held his first news conference in sixteen weeks on Wednesday, the event was notable not only for itself but for the intimation it brought that the executive branch might be more communicative in answering future requests for information from Congressional committees.

The President did more than show proper sensitivity to the impatience of legislators who see key witnesses needed for their hearings on both foreign and domestic matters disappear in the voluminous mantle of executive privilege; he promised to issue a precise statement delineating the policy to be followed on use of this privilege in his second term. The verbal drubbing administered to Agriculture Secretary Butz yesterday by irate Senators indicates the need for speed in getting out the promised policy. It can prove a constructive one if Mr. Nixon adheres to the guidepost he set forth in his news conference: "The general attitude I have is to be as liberal as possible in terms of making people available to testify before the Congress, and we are not going to use executive privilege as a shield for conversations that might be just embarrassing to us."

Particularly when it comes to explaining and seeking advise on foreign policy, the war's end gives the President an opportunity to start afresh in his troubled Congressional relations. One of the most galling grievances of the elected representatives through the worst phases of the Vietnam tragedy was that they were not engaged or consulted in major policy decisions.

And so it was in earlier conflicts too. "The matters which have come before us involving foreign policy generally have come before us after the deed has been done," said one Congressional critic of executive power

a quarter-century ago. "The Congress has come in after the decision has been made and the Congress has had to back up the decision that has been made by our State Department and by the executive branch."

That was the complaint on July 3, 1947, of the young Congressman from California, Richard M. Nixon. As President, Mr. Nixon now has the occasion to redress the grievance that he, as many others after him, so deeply felt.