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President Ford's Overture to the Black Caucus

Rep. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.), who was a member of the original Congressional Black Caucus that tried for 14 months before it finally succeeded in getting an audience with President Nixon, is naturally pleased that President Ford, after less than a week in office, had already requested a meeting with the Caucus.

But Rangel admits that he was less than totally enthusiastic about the prospect of such a meeting until Gen. Haig made it clear that the President was prepared to discuss "substantive issues."

As chairman of the Caucus since February, Rangel said he would have had misgivings about a meeting that was merely "a political gesture."

Well, political gesture or not, the invitation — which President Ford personally telephoned to Rangel — suggests the prospect of a far different relationship than existed between the former President and the Caucus, a group comprising all 16 black members of the House.

As a matter of fact, the meeting is the result of some two-way signaling for a new relationship. Rangel, for instance, sent a congratulatory wire to the new President upon his inauguration—a significant gesture in view of the fact that only one member of the Caucus, Rep. Andrew Young (D-Ga.), voted for Mr. Ford's confirmation as Vice President.

It was also communicated to special presidential assistant Stanley Scott

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that the Caucus wanted to be "supportive" of the new administration. Scott picked up the signal and sent a memo to Mr. Ford who, some 15 minutes later, was on the phone to Rangel.

It could be an important gesture. By extending the invitation himself, and at the very beginning of his administration, President Ford was saying: Forget the Nixon episode; forget my own legislative record. Let's see if we can't work together, starting now.

That's pretty much the way Rangel sees it, and he says the Caucus is willing to give it a try.

"There's a — not honeymoon, but a well, common-law relationship between us," he said. "His party's philosophy is not compatible with that of our party. But if his programs are designed to meet the needs of people, there's no reason we can't work together."

One of the President's problems with blacks is his legislative reputation, particularly with regard to civil rights, even though a look at his actual voting record shows a solid string of pro-civil rights votes.

"It's a fuzzy type of civil rights rec-

ord," Rangel said. He voted for much of the legislation on final passage, but if you know the legislative process, what the final votes don't show is his efforts to water down and weaken the bills before they came to final vote.

Even so, he said, the Ford voting record is "no worse than Truman's, Johnson's or Kennedy's. Much of the Ford record reflects his roles as congressman from Grand Rapids and House Minority Leader. Our hope now is that with his new responsibilities, he will — is there a faster word than 'grow'?"

If Rangel is restrained in his enthusiasm over the Ford invitation, he is surprisingly free of bitterness over the Nixon rebuff. The two men simply faced different political realities, he believes.

"For Nixon to become President, he had to put a lot of pieces together, particularly the coalition of Southern whites and Republicans. What could he get from blacks?"

"How different is this with Jerry Ford? He's not in the White House as a result of coalitions, but because of all his friends in the Congress. While other presidents might tell themselves,

"This is what I would like to do if I hadn't made all those commitments," Ford can go ahead and do it."

But do what?

"We're willing to take him at his word that his top priority is fighting inflation," Rangel said, and while Caucus members will leave behind a series of position papers on black interests, there will be "no shopping list of things that will bankrupt the country."

On the other hand, he said, there were hints in President Ford's message to the Congress that social action programs may be among the first to fall to the ax of economy and that too little effort will be made to reduce the impact of both inflation and budget cuts on the poor.

"If the budget is going to be cut, we'd like to know where," Rangel said. "We know he's committed to a strong defense budget, but will there be some priorities for people? That's the kind of thing we want to talk about."

Beyond that, Rangel does not foresee any particular hostility between black representatives and the new President.

"There's really not that much record to go on," he said. "He introduced no major legislation. The only two things he did to distinguish himself were leading the fight to expel my predecessor (the late Adam Clayton Powell) and the attempt to impeach Justice Douglas."

For now, he says, the mood in the Caucus seems to be: "He's friendly and he's honest. Let's leave him alone and let him grow."