

President Nixon has chosen a potentially self-defeating course in deciding to withhold long-range plans for foreign military aid from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

The struggle for information is part of the struggle over policy, and no one has ever found a way to draw a sharp line in this recurrent conflict between the Chief Executive and Congress. Ever since George Washington visited the Senate to seek its advice and consent with regard to a treaty, Presidents have not found it easy to share their authority in foreign affairs with Congress even though the Constitution commands such sharing.

History suggests that in the long run the wisest course for a President is to take the committees of Congress into his confidence, sharing all desired information with them and trusting to their common desire to protect the public interest. The only exceptions—and they arise infrequently—are situations in which the public disclosure of information would unfairly damage the reputation of a Government employe or private citizen, as in the controversy involving the State Department, the Army and the investigating subcommittee headed by the late Senator Joseph R. McCarthy in 1953-54.

In the current clash, what is at stake is money. Congress is being asked to appropriate \$4 billion for the next two years to finance military aid to thirty foreign countries. Unless the Foreign Relations Committee is to operate in the dark in authorizing this large expenditure, it has a right to know what obligations this country would incur in giving this help and whether military officials plan to increase this assistance or taper it off. For these purposes, the five-year plans worked out in the Pentagon for each recipient country are relevant, even indispensable, documents.

President Nixon's decision to withhold these plans from the Foreign Relations Committee is particularly dubious because it comes after Secretary of Defense Laird repeatedly told the committee that no such documents exist. This pattern of executive behavior can only heighten the suspicion of many members of Congress that the Defense Department has some questionable long-term commitments in mind.

The military assistance program can scarcely stand this kind of Congressional distrust because, under the best of circumstances, it is an unsatisfactory undertaking. It involves helping governments which are authoritarian, like the unsavory regime in Greece and the Franco dictatorship in Spain, or countries in Latin America which are economically underdeveloped and should not be wasting their men and resources on military establishments. Or aid goes to countries like Laos and Cambodia, which are hardly nations in the modern Western sense at all. A strategic or diplomatic case can be made for helping some of these countries, but in each instance the case ought to be justified in detail. The record of military aid funds squandered or misdirected is not one to encourage any easy Congressional confidence in the Pentagon's judgment.

In choosing to invoke executive privilege instead of relying upon candor and the force of the facts, President Nixon invites Congressional retaliation through aid cut-backs even more drastic than the facts would justify.