

Phrase, 'unavailable for comment,' is elitist, not for a free society

WASHINGTON — Now that the election is over, the first duty of the new administration will be to rid the country of the phrase, "unavailable for comment."

I think it's an elitist phrase, unbecoming a free society, and yet it has been drummed into our consciousness for 10, these many months by every newspaper, radio and TV station in America.

Not even Mr. Agnew can blame this one on the press. What are reporters to say when they know a man is hiding but can't prove it?

Take Mr. Maurice Stans, the former secretary of Commerce. When reporters tried to ask him about the secret fund which he had raised apparently in order to sabotage our American political process, Mr. Stans was "unavailable for comment."

Or Mr. Dwight Chapin, the President's assistant in the Oval Office. Reporters wanted to ask Mr. Chapin about evidence that he had bossed a spy and sabotage operation involving the activities of Mr. Donald Segretti, who, it is alleged, reported to him frequently. But Mr. Chapin, who as far as anyone knows keeps regular office hours right next door to the President, was "unavailable for comment."

Then there's Mr. Nixon's lawyer, Mr. Herbert W. Kalmbach. He is alleged to have signed the checks which paid for the operations. But for months, reporters who have tried to ask him about it are reduced to saying that "Mr. Kalmbach was unavailable for comment today."

Now it stands to reason that any man who can make himself unavailable for comment must be rich; either that, or be in possession of the luxuries of the rich through the beneficence of the public.

Only a rich man can afford to pay someone at his office and someone at his home to say that he is unavailable for comment. After all, you don't pick up the telephone yourself and say, "I'm unavailable for comment."

And you know perfectly well that you and I, if we wished to duck a reporter or a bill collector, would get caught answering the phone at 6 a.m. or hearing our children answer it. No matter how much you drilled them in advance, one of the kids would blurt out, "Just a minute, Daddy's in the shower, but I'll get him."

Of course, a man who is unavailable for comment might be traveling, getting off an airplane, say, in Damascus, just in time to catch the nonstop to Tripoli; just in time to catch the nonstop to Rome, and so forth.

He could be shooting big game, as Mr. Stans was wont to do before he became unavailable for comment. Or investigating relics in the jungle of Southern Mexico. Or exploring ice caps at one of the poles.

But any of these pursuits would cost money. That's why the phrase "unavailable for comment" is elitist and undemocratic. We can forgive it in our very highest officials. A President, for example, can be "unavailable for comment" and we all know that means he's too busy and we forgive him, as we forgave President Nixon during the campaign just ended during which he made himself more unavailable than any man who ever ran for the office before.

But otherwise, only the rich can get by with it. A poor man has to say "I refuse to answer," which sounds a lot more incriminating, as befits those who are poor.