

PRESIDENT FORD'S assurances of openness in government were dealt a serious blow by his decision Thursday night to veto the amendments to the Freedom of Information Act. Those amendments, intended to make it easier for citizens and the press to learn what is going on within government, could have played an important role in bringing about that promised openness. Congress was willing; the amendments passed both houses by substantial margins. But Mr. Ford chose instead to accept the counsel of the bureaucracy that these changes in the law somehow menaced the operation of government.

The section that caused the President to bring down the weight of his veto power provides that documents that are stamped "secret" must be proved to contain valid secrets if a citizen or a reporter seeks to inspect them. An orderly mechanism was provided for seeing this purpose through. The legislation required that, when a dispute arose over such a document, a federal district court judge would inspect the document in private and determine whether it was in the public interest for the document to be released.

There were other provisions of the act, all of them of paramount importance in the effort to make the gov-

ernment more accountable to those it seeks to serve. The new legislation would have reduced the number of days within which an agency would be required to say whether it intended to provide the public with a previously withheld document. The FBI and other investigative agencies would no longer have been able to withhold material unless they could justify doing so on the grounds that a current investigation or a defendant's rights would be compromised. And, perhaps most important of all from the bureaucrat's vantagepoint, if an official withheld a document and the court decided the document should not have been withheld, the official might be required by the Civil Service Commission to give an account of his actions.

All of these provisions were in the spirit of the kind of relationship between government and the public that Mr. Ford assured the Congress he wanted when he made his first appearance before a joint session only days after taking office. Now he has vetoed a piece of legislation that sought to overhaul a well-intentioned law that has languished ineffectively for nearly a decade. In so doing, the President has put it up to both houses of Congress to muster the votes to make the Freedom of Information Act a more effective servant of the public's right to know.