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Letters to the Editor

Presidential Power and Responsibility

To the Editor:

The United States is drifting into a form of Presidential tyranny. The office of the Presidency was conceived as a powerful one by the framers of the Constitution; but in recent years the powers of this office have been aggrandized to the point that the President, if he chooses, can function as a virtual tyrant.

President Nixon, together with his inner circle of handpicked men, alone decides what the "right conditions" of a peace settlement are. If these conditions are not met to his satisfaction, he is free to unleash a brutal aerial bombardment. There apparently is no public forum to which he is accountable for such actions, no legislative body in which he is expected to defend his decisions and whose consent he must obtain.

Certainly Congress has not functioned as such a body in recent years. The President's personal staff, where the real decisions are made, is not subject to legislative review. Mr. Nixon has totally insulated himself from effective questioning by the press; access to information about the Government is seriously threatened by the Supreme Court's ruling that news reporters must, upon judicial demand, disclose confidential sources of information.

More than any other recent President, Mr. Nixon has sought to pack the Court with ideologically conforming justices, thus tending to neutralize the judicial branch as well as the legislative. The information-gathering agencies of the Government are totally under the control of the executive branch.

These are conditions which, if fully exploited, approximate tyranny. The powerlessness of ordinary citizens who care deeply about their country and its policies but who are totally

without influence on the course of events, is a humiliating and angering experience.

The White House is unresponsive. The Congress is archaic and ineffectual. The courts and grand juries threaten dissenters.

To be sure, an election is held every four years. But the most recent one was a charade as far as any serious discussion of issues and defense of policies by Mr. Nixon was concerned. The election was managed in terms of image, propaganda and exploitation of fears. In view of his landslide victory and the absence of any real balance of powers, Mr. Nixon is virtually a free agent. Not only is this bad for the country, it is also bad for him.

Congress alone appears to retain inherent power to check the President, but it refuses to exercise it. The Senate could force an alteration in the war policy and in domestic priorities if it was really determined to do so. Even without House support, it could refuse to appropriate funds until policies are changed.

It could demand a more effective accounting from the White House. It could initiate imaginative and desperately needed legislation, overriding Presidential vetoes if necessary. Perhaps the most urgent question of 1973 if, Will it act?

PETER C. HODGSON
Nashville, Dec. 23, 1972

To the Editor:

It seems to me that your editorial of Dec. 28 disregards the fundamental questions involved.

What is war? Obviously it is a struggle between powers to enforce their will by force. It follows that each must use its full capability to win. This we have not done.

Does President Nixon want to prolong the war? I can think of no person with more to lose and less to gain by so doing. As Commander in Chief and with knowledge of all the facts he is in a position to use his power and exercise his judgment. It is naive to demand that he should make public all that transpires in a very complicated situation.

Is there reason to believe that North Vietnam is willing to settle for a permanent peace in Southeast Asia? If the answer is "yes" why do they insist on keeping an army in South Vietnam and why not accept our offer to let a honest election decide how that country shall be governed in the future?

Are private citizens of a country at war immune from the death and destruction caused by it? It does not seem just that only soldiers who have to leave home and their affairs should also have to be the only ones to suffer. After all, it is the citizens not the soldiers who have the power to make war and peace.

RALPH H. CUTLER
Morristown, N. J., Dec. 28, 1972