

Joseph Kraft *Post 8/16/73*

Congress Ends an Unpopular War

American fighting in Indochina has come to a fit end. Bombing of Cambodia ceases not by presidential fiat after a negotiated settlement, nor by withdrawal under irresistible pressure from the Communists in Vietnam or the antiwar minority in this country.

The end comes through restraints deliberately imposed upon the President by the Congress in obedience to overwhelming public feeling that is proper because, while presidents waged the war, Congress was permissive and the public as a whole acquiesced.

This is not to say that individual presidential action counts for little in the horrors and follies of the Vietnam war. President Nixon continued American participation in the war for four years, five months and 15 days after coming to office. Hundreds of thousands of innocent people were killed in the process. He expanded the war into Cambodia, extended massive bombing to that country and North Vietnam, and practiced systematic lying to the American people.

His justification for all this was "peace with honor." It is true that early this year Hanoi agreed to something it had never previously accepted—a cease-fire that implied at least a temporary continuation of the South Vietnamese regime.

But the North Vietnamese reserved the right to keep troops in Vietnam. They maintained influence in Laos and (we now see) increased their power in Cambodia. They are now in position to

take over Cambodia and put very great pressure on South Vietnam. The foreign policy rationale advanced by President Nixon for continuing the war has already been virtually wiped out.

President Johnson bears even greater blame. He took the only truly irreversible step—the leap in the dark that made a minor guerrilla struggle into a major war. He ordered the bombing of North Vietnam.

That step resulted in a major increase of the Communist effort. It entailed, in order to protect air bases, massive dispatch of American ground troops. It compromised the President's domestic program and split his party. It was one of the colossal all-time blunders of recent American history.

Presidents Kennedy, Eisenhower and Truman are also not exempt from blame. President Kennedy sent the first ground troops to Vietnam, and he was clearly prepared to dissemble his purposes. President Eisenhower made commitments to a corrupt and weak Saigon regime. President Truman extended the American strategic umbrella to include Indochina.

But if presidents made grievous mistakes in Indochina, they did not act in a vacuum. Few complaints are less valid than the constant bleat of senators and congressmen that they were deceived by the White House.

The Congress was deceived because it wanted to have the wool pulled over its eyes. A nice case in point comes from the recent discovery by the Sen-

ate's Armed Services Committee that there was secret bombing of Cambodia, replete with a false public reporting system, for nearly a year in 1969 and 1970. But that was in fact made known at the time in press accounts. If the legislators had really wanted to know, they had only to read the papers carefully for once and follow up.

The reason the Senate and House took great pains not to know lies with the vast majority of citizens. Ever since World War II we have been asserting the total primacy of the President in foreign policy. We have pushed onto the President's desk responsibility for almost everything that happens abroad.

The recovery of Europe and the rebirth of Japan were made his business. So was holding the line against Russia and then China. So was the Near East and Latin America and Africa and Southeast Asia. It got so bad that President Nixon could feel he might be held responsible for something that happened in—of all crazy, remote, uncontrollable places—Cambodia.

Against this background, the way the Cambodian bombing was halted—by action of the country and the Congress which then curtailed the President—is a case of poetic justice. It is what should have been happening all along. For honest government in Washington and a helpful American role in the world can only be achieved if the great majority stop piling insoluble problems on the desk of the President.