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Congress and the War

President Nixon has won more time for his Vietnamization policy this week with the defeat in Senate and House of separate proposals designed to speed the end of the American military involvement in Indochina.

But the Administration must find little comfort in the mere eight-vote margin in the Senate by which it managed to beat back a modified McGovern-Hatfield amendment to the Selective Service Act, calling for withdrawal of all American forces from Indochina by June 1, 1972. There are warning signals for the Administration also in the 158 votes that were cast in the House on behalf of a move by Representatives Nedzi of Michigan and Whalen of Ohio to bar the use of funds from a defense procurement bill in Indochina after Dec. 31. Administration supporters mustered a comfortable majority in this first recorded House vote on the war issue. But now that the ground has been broken there will be further challenges to the President's war policies in the House, which can be expected to become increasingly responsive to shifting public sentiment against the war.

There is little question that a majority of both houses is in sympathy with the purposes of the McGovern-Hatfield and Nedzi-Whalen proposals. But many cling to the belief that their symbolic goal—early withdrawal—is also the objective of the President's policies and therefore are still reluctant to force the issue. There is also a lingering propensity among some members of Congress to try to evade the Constitutional responsibilities of the legislative branch. "The basic question," Senator Stennis declared, "is: do we really want to relieve the President of his responsibility in the handling of the war?"

The answer is that Congress cannot, in fact, escape its share of that heavy burden. By rejecting proposals that could hasten United States disengagement, both houses have in effect allied themselves with the existing Presidential policy of Vietnamization. As fresh occasions arise for the expression of Congressional sentiment on the war, it will be the responsibility of every member to take a searching look at the implications of that policy.

In our view, Vietnamization has proved to be based on unrealistic expectations in regard to the development of South Vietnamese self-sufficiency. It amounts to a formula for indefinite United States military involvement in Indochina, with diminishing prospects for a negotiated settlement and for return of the prisoners.