

The War Powers Veto

On November 5, 1964, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy wrote a paper on how to handle world and public opinion if the President decided to escalate the war in Vietnam. He didn't expect it to be hard:

"Congress must be consulted before any major action perhaps only by notification, . . . but preferably by talks with . . . key leaders . . . We probably do not need additional congressional authority even if we decide on very strong action . . . A Presidential statement with the rationale for action is high on any check list. An intervening fairly strong presidential noise to prepare a climate for an action statement is probably indicated and would be important . . ."

The writer is a Democratic congressman from Wisconsin.

Had the War Powers Resolution then been law, Bundy would not have been able to dismiss congressional and public opinion quite so easily.

Next week the House will vote on whether to override Mr. Nixon's veto of the compromise bill which requires that the President consult with Congress before committing U.S. forces to hostilities abroad and report to Congress within 48 hours his reasons for



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—William Bundy, 1964

doing so. At the end of 60 days, he must withdraw American forces unless Congress votes to allow him to continue the commitment. The deadline could be extended for up to 30 days to permit the safe withdrawal of the troops.

The criticism of the measure from the right is predictable enough. It was summed up in the President's veto message by his (inaccurate) claim that the bill was unconstitutional and deprived the President of the powers necessary to act decisively in times of crisis. In fact the bill's intent is simply to restore to Congress a little of the share in the warmaking process with which the Framers endowed it and which successive Presidents have since arrogated to themselves.

The events of the last week, which the President himself described as the greatest international crisis since 1962, give the lie to his objections to the bill. Had the War Powers Resolution already been law, it would not have prevented Mr. Nixon from replenishing Israel's supplies, and it would not have prevented him from calling a worldwide alert of U.S. forces as he did at 3 a.m. on Thursday morning. It would not have stopped him from

sending any of the firm notes he says he sent to Mr. Brezhnev; it would have done nothing to limit the scope of the diplomatic triumph he says he achieved. It would have meant simply that, had he decided to commit the alerted troops, he would have had to explain his actions rather more fully than Secretary Kissinger chose to do on Thursday.

The liberal objections to the bill are more serious and more complicated. They are, first that the bill will actually extend the President's warmaking powers, giving him authority he does not now possess to make war anywhere in the world for 60 days and second that even then Congress is most

unlikely to stop him. It is said that the President will identify the struggle with flag and with honor and that Congress will almost inevitably rubber-stamp it.

Both these objections carry weight—the bill is far from perfect. But they ignore not only that the President already acts thus, whether he has the legal authority or not, and that Congress is already a rubber-stamp. They also miss the less obvious but more fundamental benefit of this bill. Besides its direct impacts (the 48 hour report, the 60 day approval, etc) which do have drawbacks, the bill will have an indirect effect which is altogether beneficial. This is in the enormous impact which it will have on the decision-making process of the executive branch.

When the President considers sending troops into hostilities—even in support of a treaty commitment or to defend U.S. forces—he and his advisers will know that an affirmative decision will provoke an intense debate which, unlike today, will focus on a concrete decision to be made by Congress within 60 days. Congressmen will hold hearings, editorial writers will write editorials, columnists will construct columns, Meet the Press and Face the Nation will cross-question government spokesmen, there will be network specials, demonstrators will demonstrate, and most important, constituents will write mail—telling congressmen

whether they should say yea or nay to the President's action. This foreknowledge is bound to strengthen the hand of those in the President's council who might otherwise find it more politic to muffle their dissents.

Congress's ultimate verdict is not the most important factor. What is important is that the President and the men around him will know before he takes his decision that the scrutiny of his policy is likely to be far more consistent and purposeful than it is today. He will be much less inclined than he is today to embark upon an adventure unless he has a very good case to support it.

The real point about the War Powers bill is not that it gives the President power to go to war for 60 days (his lack of that power now doesn't limit him) nor is it that Congress is likely to force him to pull the troops out (it may well not). The bill's value, which far outweighs these defects, is that it will force the President to consider very carefully what is in store for him if he decides to make war. This is so because there will be a solid, practical reason for his more cautious counsellors to present him in advance with the arguments he will have to answer within 60 days.

The Pentagon Papers demonstrates how anxious the Johnson administration was to avoid a great national debate on its Vietnam policy. The War Powers bill not only guarantees that there will be such a debate, it will also compel the President to take public opinion into serious account when he makes his decision. In fact, it may well be not so much the debate itself but the agonizing prospect of it that will act as the most effective check on the President's warmaking. A President who rejects the bill does so only because he is concerned that his case for making war might not always be very convincing.