

In Defense of Congress

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A Record of Self-Improvement

Vice President Gerald Ford thinks "it is tragic and tremendously bad for America when only 20 per cent to 30 per cent of its citizens—if the polls are anywhere nearly correct—have a good word to say for their elected officials in Congress." It would be even more tragic if it were true, which is doubtful.

The Vice President was referring to the latest Harris poll which shows only 30 per cent public approval of President Nixon, but even less approval—21 per cent—for Congress. The Harris poll is one of the most reliable, but it is far more difficult to test opinion about an entity composed of 535 parts (like Congress) than to measure reaction to an individual like the President.

Americans have always griped about Congress. It's been a popular national pastime since the republic was founded. The real test, however, is what happens on election day when the voters have the opportunity of throwing out the rascals they don't approve of. And this test shows the people invariably and overwhelmingly reelecting the incumbents.

In the House, 96 per cent of incumbents were re-elected in 1972 and 1970. In 1968, the figure was 98 per cent. This hardly suggests deep dissatisfaction. The Harris poll also contradicts itself. It now says 72 per cent of the people disapprove of congressional handling of the Watergate case, but previous Harris polls showed very high approval of the Senate investigating committee. Other polls showed the same.

In any case, regardless of what people tell the pollsters, Congress has steadily done better in recent years, especially in the last decade. It has, and perhaps always will have, serious shortcomings, but those whose job it is to observe Congress on a daily basis can testify that there has been a consistent improvement in both intelligence and performance.

The old guard still wields great

power, but every year it is being forced to give ground. A reinvigorated Congress is making headway in reforming itself, in reining in a willful Chief Executive and in protecting the courts from presidential debasement. So all three branches of the government are benefiting from the changes on Capitol Hill.

This year a record number of senators and representatives are quitting. At last count, 38 House members had announced they would not seek reelection. Nearly all the retirees are high-ranking veterans. In the Senate, six are stepping down, four of whom range in age from 73 to 81.

The congressional record would be still better were it not for the rash of Nixon vetoes, which killed legislation in behalf of raising the minimum wage, expanding health services, rehabilitating the blind and crippled, reforming campaign spending, funding poverty and child-care programs and helping rural water-sewage projects, to name only a few.

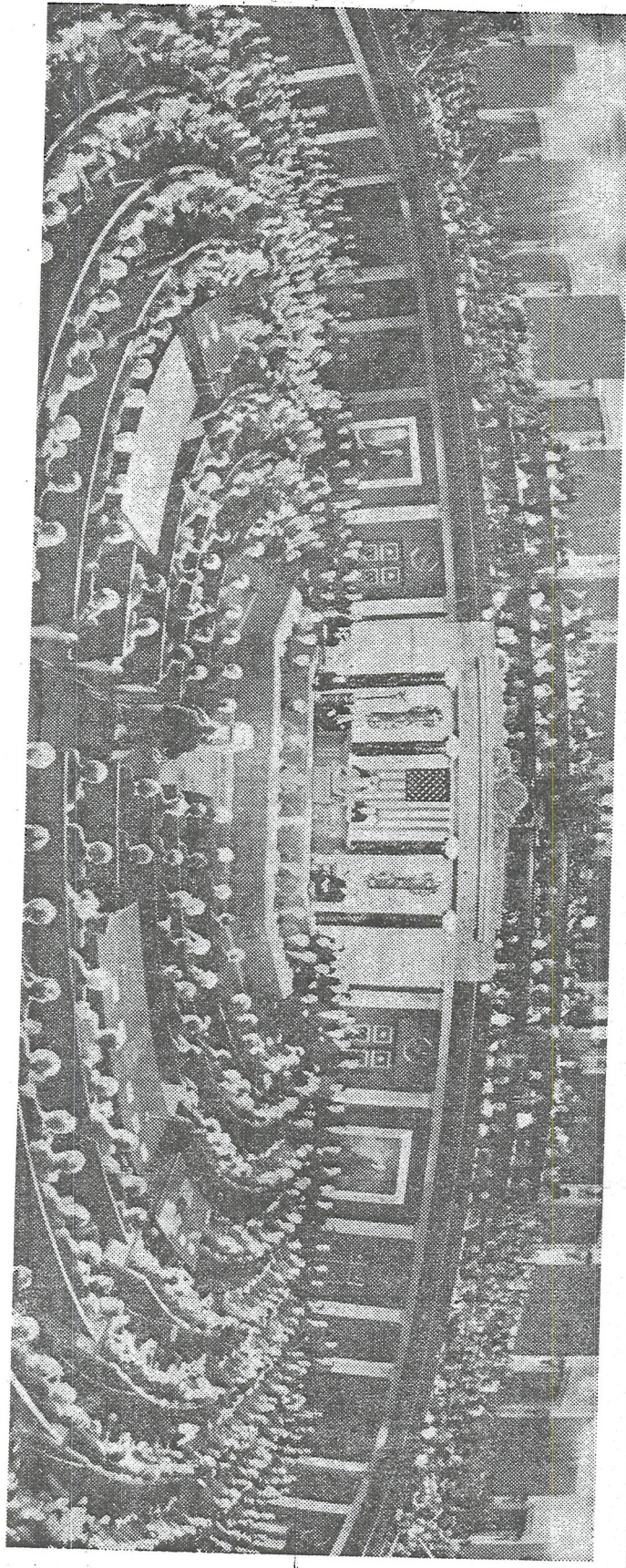
Meanwhile, to its credit, Congress forced through a much expanded Social Security program; it stopped the administration's impoundment of funds appropriated for crucial social and environmental purposes, and, on the foreign front, it ended the bombing of Cambodia, leashed the war-making powers of the President and repealed that blank check for war, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution.

Above all, though, Congress has set about reforming itself, a more difficult task than reforming the other branches of government. The House, for instance, has ended the secrecy of committee hearings, curtailed the old seniority system and set up a new Steering and Policy Committee. Moreover, both the Senate and House are working much harder than they used to.

Back in the Fifties, Congress met only one day out of three, but the present 93d Congress is just about the best on attendance and voting. The average member was present for 82 per cent of all votes in 1972 and last year this rose to 89 per cent, an all-time record. There's still plenty of room for further improvement, but Congress deserves better than that 21 per cent approval in the Harris poll. In the light of Watergate, it's painful to imagine what the United States would have done without Congress to fall back on.

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