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The House Votes for 'Peace'

Forgetting the costly lesson of the Tonkin Gulf resolution, the House of Representatives once more has let itself be steamrollered into endorsing Presidential policies in Vietnam with no precise definition of what it was endorsing and no careful examination of the possible implications.

To be sure, yesterday's resolution affirming "support for the President in his efforts to negotiate a just peace in Vietnam" is on its face innocuous to the point of being meaningless. It hardly seems in a class with the blank check Congress impetuously handed to President Johnson after the Tonkin Gulf incidents of August 1964. Yet, many in Congress felt they were undertaking a very modest commitment then.

President Nixon had already embraced the House draft in advance of the present vote as being "along the lines of the proposal I made in a speech on Nov. 3." This should have been enough to give the House pause, as it apparently did the Senate. The President's Nov. 3 address did promise peace, but it also offered a program that could lead to prolonged conflict. In that speech, Mr. Nixon tied American withdrawal from Vietnam to the continued withdrawal of enemy troops and to the steady improvement of South Vietnamese forces—two extremely dubious propositions.

The President also hinted in his address at the possibility of re-escalation. So did Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird in secret testimony before a House Appropriations subcommittee last October that has just been released. Is the House prepared to endorse such a step? We think not. But the President may attempt to draw that conclusion from the loosely worded resolution adopted by the majority yesterday.

At the very least, the Foreign Affairs Committee should have held thorough hearings on this Administration-backed resolution to determine its precise meaning and to examine the implications of the "plan for peace" which has been so uncritically endorsed. Instead the committee held no hearings and reported the resolution after less than two hours of closed-door discussions.

There should at the very least have been an opportunity for amendments to clarify and qualify the original draft, prepared with the assistance of White House aides. Deprived of any such opportunity, some members went along with a resolution that they freely admitted, in a separate statement, they found confusing.

It is pointless to talk of restoring Congressional responsibility in foreign affairs when the House can act so cavalierly on a matter of such grave importance.