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The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea

By TOM WICKER

In the era of the imperial Presidency, when occupants of the White House make war with impunity and decree national policies with Olympian hauteur, it is tempting to look to Congress for salvation. But, alas! as Mr. Khrushchev used to say, that is setting a goat to guard the cabbage patch.

Not only has Congress repeatedly and ignominiously failed to do anything about the war in Vietnam, either through its supposed power of the purse or by a reassertion of its lost constitutional power to declare war; now it is handing over to the President virtually the last vestige of its responsibility as a separate but equal branch of the Government.

That is not too strong a description of the House's grant to President Nixon of the power to cut spending in any way he chooses, in order to hold Government outlays to \$250 billion through next June. Unless the Senate balks at this abdication, the Federal purse will have been handed to Mr. Nixon for single-handed disbursement.

Steve Hess, the political scientist and associate of the President, was correct in pointing out in a letter to

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The New York Times that the authority granted to the President by the House is the equivalent of an "item veto" on appropriations. That is, Mr. Nixon could cut back on spending anywhere he chose, without regard to the amounts voted by Congress.

Mr. Hess was correct, too, that all modern Presidents have favored the item veto; why should they not? For years, moreover, political scientists have advocated it as a tool by which the executive branch could cope with such Congressional devices as pork-barrel bills and irrelevant or mischievous amendments.

It is not to condone those devices or the many other deficiencies of Congress to say, however, that the last thing this country needs is to pile even more and greater powers upon the Presidency (whether it is occupied by Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson or George McGovern). Inflation is

a bad illness, no doubt about it; but if the cure is an even more swollen and impregnable Presidency, equipped at last with that power of the purse that Congress used to guard so jealously, it is a disastrous way to get well.

Here is an Administration that talks piously about decentralization but which has so centralized foreign policy in the White House basement that Secretary of State Rogers is at the U.N. talking about aircraft hijackers while Dr. Kissinger and Mr. Nixon between them decide matters of life and death, war and peace, in absolute privacy; which has very nearly abolished Cabinet offices as vital organs of government, while elevating an untouchable White House staff beyond any power previously known in Washington; and which now demands of Congress unlimited sway over spending authority specifically denied the President by the Constitution. Some decentralization!

Meanwhile, almost anywhere you look, Congress piles up its own record of ineptitude and iniquity; small comfort there for the critic of the White House. In the House, members are not even permitted to vote on the proposition of detaching a few dollars from the mammoth Highway Trust Fund for purposes of financing mass transit facilities; in the Senate, the Finance Committee—which would have graced the Administration of Genghis Khan—guts an urgently needed pension-reform bill while endlessly splicing its concern for the elderly.

With friends like that, nobody would need an enemy. Under the leadership of Russell Long, the Finance Committee chairman, the Senate even succeeded in worsening the welfare mess—a feat as ingenious as it was indefensible. Not only did Mr. Long lead it to the death of Mr. Nixon's Family Assistance Plan and, with the President's approval, the improvements to it proposed by Senator Ribicoff and endorsed by Secretary Richardson of H.E.W.; but the Senate also slipped into the remaining legislation some special penalties on the poor, such as:

¶Any state may require any welfare recipient, without exception, to take a public service job for no pay except

his or her welfare benefits.

¶Work incentives are decreased by reducing allowable deductions from earned income; and medical services are cut back while welfare recipients will be forced to pay a portion of the costs.

¶Residency requirements are established, despite Supreme Court decisions to the contrary.

¶Federally funded legal services programs will be prevented from challenging any provision of the Social Security Act.

The Senate approved also a \$400-million test program for various welfare plans; but the program is so ill-defined that it might be possible for a state to substitute a test plan—say, Mr. Long's scheme to turn welfare recipients into a forced labor pool at sweatshop wages—for the present program. At the least, the test procedure will set back serious welfare reform for a probable five years.