

Angry Congress to cut defense, Vietnam aid?

WASHINGTON — Just before his recent trip to the West Coast, President Nixon met with everyone in the White House with duties connected with his legislative program. "Just remember," he told them, "on most issues this year, we don't need fifty-one votes. Thirty-three plus one will be enough."

The President was speaking of the Senate, with its 100 voting members. The meaning of his fairly chilling remark was that in most arguments with Congress that he could foresee, he would use his veto and therefore did not feel the need of a normal majority. The need was for no more than "thirty-three plus one" — or just the minimum required to sustain a presidential veto.

As matters now stand, the Senate is fairly unlikely to give him his "thirty-three plus one" on all sorts of questions this year. In four recent votes classified as "crunch" in the White House, the cumulative total of senators supporting the President was under 50. That gives an average, per crunch, of hardly more than 12 senators on the President's side.

The cruel claim

That may change, of course, as the President keeps hammering home the cruel claim that he is against waste, against inflation and against higher taxes, while the wicked Democrats in Congress favor all three of these evils because they are the mere creatures of so many special interests. As one agonized Senate liberal remarked to this reporter — after denouncing the President as a subverter of the Constitution — even the bravest senators feel they are in something of a tight spot.

"We say we are defending our constitutional prerogatives," he lamented. "But the voters may just conclude we are defending our right to be wrong."

The real point

In any case, although the President had the Senate in mind at the time, the real point of the President's grimly determined remark to his staff goes far beyond the Senate. The Senate, after all, cannot override a presidential veto without the help of the House. Both chambers must produce a two-thirds anti-Nixon majority to get results.

Here, one must add, is where the universal interpretation of a recent test vote in the House has been downright grossly misleading. REAP—the obscure Rural Environmental Aid Program of the Agriculture Department—was the subject of the test. Incredibly enough, REAP was actually chosen for a first test by the House Democratic leadership because it looked like a good chance to beat the tar out of Richard M. Nixon, who

has ruthlessly cut off all funds for the program.

Looked like a good test

REAP looked like a good test because a minor but highly prosperous lobbyist, Robert Koch of the National Limestone Institute, has organized so much support that REAP has always been beyond attack in the past.

Joseph Alsop

Here the deal is that REAP generously helps to finance farmers' purchases of agricultural limestone.

Most of the urban Democratic liberals were also in line because they have made a deal with farm state members on the old principle: "I'll scratch your back, if you scratch mine." A few Democratic dissidents, plus the Republicans ably marshaled by their leader, Rep. Gerald Ford of Michigan, seemed to be the President's only troops. Yet the final vote was only 251 for REAP, 142 against, and 38 not voting.

Nixon will veto REAP

REAP will surely pass the Senate, but the President will just as surely veto it, probably with a short message about waste, inflation, higher taxes, lobbyists and special interests. As anyone can see, moreover, the pro-REAP forces were above a score of votes short of the two-thirds needed to override a presidential veto. On a vote to override, moreover, Minority Leader Ford and the other White House stalwarts are sure they can do better than they did in last week's test.

There are some possible exceptions, like certain bills to subsidize medical research, where a vote against could be interpreted as open support for more and more heart attacks. But overall, the recent REAP vote is considered by all insiders as decisive proof of the President's power to veto over and over again, in the supposed constitutional crisis over spending bills that will unquestionably pit the President against the Congress.

The recent House vote seems to say, in fact, that this well-advertised epic struggle of the future is as good as won ahead—and by the President. The real danger to the President lies elsewhere. Will the liberal Democrats retaliate by denuding the national defense in the name of "cuttingspending"? And will they risk the chance of peace in Vietnam by denying the aid money needed for reconstructing both North and South Vietnam?

These are the real questions behind the great "constitutional crisis." These questions may force the President to go to the country—but not REAP!