

News A

Why Congress Can't Win

By Mary McGroarty
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The Encyclopedia Britannica, in its section on "tournaments," is perhaps as enlightening a source as any on why, in the present joust between the White House and the legislature, so little money is being put on Congress.

The Britannica tells us of the knightly ritual on the eve of the meeting. The new-

ly dubbed knight spends the night in the chapel, his weapons on the altar.

In the morning, there is the caparison of the horse, the polishing of the armor, the donning of it piece by piece, the visor, the lance rest, the greaves. The squires wearing the knight's device study the or-

der of battle. The call goes out for the trumpeter to announce the opening of the engagement.

Except that when the trumpet sounds on Capitol Hill, it's often for milk and cookies. Just as all is in readiness for the big clash, time out is called. Congress gets down from its horse, removes its armor, puts it back in the armory and prepares to go home to see the folks and tell them what it's been doing.

Adversary

The adversary in the White House, of course, never gets off his horse. He is always battle-ready. Whenever he goes, to San Clemente, to Key Biscayne, the White House goes with him. If he wishes to talk to the country, he raises a hand for four networks to convene. Congress clattered in to town on January 3, five in its

eye and on its tongue. It was, according to the Congressional Quarterly, one of its chief chroniclers, "in a defiant mood." But 23 meetings later, it was in recess.

There has been much snorting and posturing in those first days. The Christmas bombing still hung on the air, and there was rage under the dome, and high talk. If the President didn't end the war, Congress would.

But not right away, of course. They could hardly do anything before the inauguration, could they?

His Plans

The President ignored them, went forward with his plans and, when it suited him, dispatched his squire, Henry Kissinger, to Paris to make peace. Considerably deflated, the knights turned their attention to the budget.

"He can't do this to us," the fumed.

In the debate over the confirmation of Caspar Weinberger, the President's cheese-paring choice for secretary of HEW, the agency that takes baskets to the villagers, Senator Harold Hughes (Dem-Iowa) pictured the problem vividly.

"When they say to the people that we cannot afford to do anything for the ones who must rely on themselves, they are talking about the aged, the little old lady sitting in a room somewhere and eating boiled eggs for lunch . . . the children of the country, the poor, the disabled, the alcoholic and the drug addict. These are the people that this administration thinks are contributing to the inflation and the spending."

But only ten senators, including Hughes, voted against Weinberger, be-

cause, as Senator Jacob Javits (Rep-N.Y.) put it, "We ought, if we can, to give the President those he wants for his cabinet."

You never hear anyone saying that the President ought to yield to Congressional wishes, or that it is impolite or discourteous of him to impound funds they have appropriated or to slash programs they have voted.

Institution

The President is a popular institution these days, whether the holder of it is personally popular or not. Richard Nixon understood that very well when in the recent campaign he ran as an office, not as a man.

Mostly because of the war, Congress has the image of a dithering, nattering assemblage of anxious conformists, startled in protocol and haunted by what the

neighbors will say.

Actually, it is one of the functions of the President to explain himself, to define the country's actions. But this President spends less time explaining himself than any in recent memory, and Congress.

After the Lincoln Day rhetoric of the Republicans, there will be another rhetorical interlude for the Democrats' Jefferson-Jackson Day, and that will be followed by an Easter recess.

Congress spends an inordinate amount of time getting on and off its horse. Maybe if it would just sit through the winter and spring like a state legislature and spend more time acting, it would in time acquire the momentum, cunning and vigilance to give the President the sense that he has formidable opposition in a tournament that has yet to be joined.

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News
Analysis