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No More Cambodias

The firmness with which Senators of both parties are resisting efforts to kill or cripple the Cooper-Church amendment on Cambodia is encouraging evidence of a new determination in Congress to restore the constitutional balance in reaching vital decisions on war and peace.

The proposal to bar funding of American troops in Cambodia after June 30 does not infringe on the President's constitutional power to command the armed forces in the nation's defense. It does reassert the long-eroded constitutional prerogatives of Congress to participate in foreign policy and defense decisions, which President Nixon ignored when he unilaterally ordered American troops into Cambodia.

An aroused public opinion, to which Congress is at last responding, already has prompted the President to make an open commitment to terminate his Cambodian adventure by June 30. The Cooper-Church amendment would enable Congress to share responsibility for this important decision, as it should under the American constitutional system, and would give it the reassuring force of law.

The measure does not interfere with the military operations now under way. Nor does it bar any important actions in the future that the President himself has not already foreclosed. It does not prohibit limited arms aid to the Cambodian forces nor air interdiction of Communist supply lines through Cambodia to South Vietnam. Nor—despite some Congressional misgivings on this point—does it rule out future American air and logistical support to South Vietnamese units in Cambodia, although Mr. Nixon has pledged himself to halt the current support operations by June 30.

There is no need, despite Administration urging, for the amendment to re-state the President's power to take action to protect American forces in the field should they be in imminent danger of attack. Congress cannot restrict this power. What Congress seeks to prevent is the use of this power as a pretext for military operations of wider scope undertaken without consultation with the nation's elected legislators.

Essentially, the Cooper-Church proposal is a warning shot across the bows that says: "No More Cambodias!" It does not create a constitutional crisis, but implies that the President could precipitate one—if he again widens the war or reverses American disengagement from Vietnam without Congressional agreement. The Administration argument that the amendment would impair the President's credibility in dealing with the Communists is unpersuasive. The way to assure Presidential credibility is to gain Congressional support by treating Congress as a partner in decisions on peace and war. Acceptance of the Cooper-Church amendment would be a useful step in that direction. But whether the Administration accepts it or not, the Senate can best serve the national interest now by pressing ahead with its enactment.