

NYTimes

APR 17 1975

A Responsible Congress

By Anthony Lewis

BOSTON, April 16—A common complaint against Congress, when it acts on foreign affairs, is that it seeks power without responsibility. It snipes at the President's foreign policy, the critics say, and legislates restrictions; but it does not offer—or take responsibility for—a genuine alternative policy.

There is something to that criticism, historically, though perhaps not so much as Executive apologists would have us believe. Congress can have a healthy impact even if it exercises only a checking negative on foreign policy. A recent example was the act barring U. S. military action in Indochina after Aug. 15, 1973; without it, the Executive might well have sent American forces back into the conflict.

But at this moment Congress is attempting something more complicated. That is to work out a policy, responsibly, to limit the trauma of the ending in Indochina.

The Senate Foreign Relations Committee's meeting with President Ford the other day was the visible symbol of a changed relationship. It was said to be the first such visit to the White House in fifty years.

Ordinarily Congress is not in a position to make detailed policy. It lacks adequate information, and there are too many different points of view. But in this case special circumstances made the Congressional role crucial.

For one thing, the Senate committee had confidence on the facts. It had just sent two staff members to Saigon, and their report was being read by Executive officials who did not trust the information coming from the rigid U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, Graham A. Martin. For another, there was a remarkable degree of unity among the committee members, across the political spectrum.

The Senators were convinced that Mr. Ford's policy, as stated in his message to Congress last week, was utterly unrealistic. They did not believe the talk about building a new position of strength for Saigon with more military aid. They were convinced that there was one immediate problem—evacuating Americans—and that nothing was being done about it. Questions to Secretary of State Kissinger at the White House meeting brought indications that there was still no real evacuation plan.

After the meeting, Mr. Ford ordered evacuation to begin. The Senate committee agreed to give the President \$200 million, primarily to that end, and a degree of legal discretion to use troops in the last resort to save Americans. But the President was cool to

that formula, and the actual pace of American evacuation from Saigon remained dangerously slow. Thus it appears that Congress will have to act on its own to prevent disaster.

In both branches, there is recognition now of a problem so delicate that no one likes to mention it out loud: the danger that President Thieu's army will begin shooting at Americans as evacuation goes on. That is the unstated reason for the talk about more military aid—to keep General Thieu hoping. One source put it: "We are in a ransom situation."

One advantage that Congress has in dealing with this bitter ending is that its ego is not involved in the failed policy. Secretary Kissinger's is. He

ABROAD AT HOME

seems frozen in ideas that have not worked, such as creating a position of "military stability" before negotiations.

The time is running out for negotiation. Realistic reports from Saigon speak of days or weeks; a few weeks.

No one should pretend that there is an easy way out of the disaster. But negotiations between a new Saigon Government and the Communists could still preserve some future opportunity for political competition in South Vietnam. The Communists would obviously rather not move into Saigon by force, with all the administrative and economic and human difficulties that would result; they would prefer to approach power through a coalition, and that means negotiating.

It is in America's strong interest now to encourage negotiations. Our own sense of decency would be less damaged if the long war were brought to a political rather than a bloody military end, and there would be more hope for the Vietnamese closest to us either to get out or to adjust to change.

But American influence for negotiations will have to come from Congress. Mr. Kissinger is too committed to his failed military policy—and to Nguyen Van Thieu, who will have to leave if there are to be talks. The U.S. is propping up Mr. Thieu. Most South Vietnamese politicians are ready to negotiate now.

Those of us brought up on Presidential government may find it odd to talk about Congressional leadership in foreign policy. Congress was so often dismissed as inept. But compared to what? Compared to the record of our Presidents and Secretaries of State in Indochina, Congress shines. It will deserve our trust the more if it takes responsibility in these last difficult days.