

# Bombs and Balance

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, March 4—Every few days now, somebody introduces a bill in Congress designed to influence the course of the Indochina war or bring America's participation in it to an end, but none of these has any real chance of success.

There are bills to end the fighting by the end of the year or by the middle or end of next year; bills to forbid the President to invade or assist in the invasion of North Vietnam; bills to compel the President's White House aides to testify on Capitol Hill; bills to end any war not approved by the Congress after thirty days of fighting.

But all these are opposed by the President and would have to get a two-thirds vote to pass over his veto, so bills and even bombs on Capitol Hill are ineffective, which leaves the power of the purse and the power of the ballot as the two most effective instruments of protest.

Looked at realistically, the first of these is a very limited political weapon. It might be possible to pass a bill against sending U.S. foot soldiers into North Vietnam, if the President acquiesced in this as he did in Cambodia and Laos, but there is not more than a covey of doves who would vote to cut off funds after a certain date and risk the charge that they were crippling the Commander in Chief and abandoning the troops on the field.

The reaction to all this in the peace movement is frustration and despair. As spring comes on, no doubt there will be more acts of desperation, like the bombing of the Capitol, and more demonstration, but these could easily reinforce the President's will and his support, and divert attention from the battlefield to the streets.

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It does not follow from this, however, that the people are helpless or that political action must wait until next year. There is much work to be done. A vast amount of intellectual and physical energy is now going into comparatively hopeless projects to limit the President's war-making powers, while comparatively little is going into the complicated, tedious and important business of organizing a massive registration at home and overseas.

For example, over one million eligible voters in the armed services did not register or vote in the 1968 Presidential election and the number eligible to vote in 1972 will be much larger. It is possible to register in most of the big states right now, but residency requirements differ from state to state, and this is a particular problem for the highly mobile young 18-to-21-year-olds, 11.5 million of whom will be eligible to vote in the Presidential election for the first time.

Some organizations, of course, are at work on registration, the Federal Voting Assistance Program, the League of Women Voters and Common Cause, among others, but the task is infinitely greater than machinery to deal with it.

University students, for example, seem to be complaining more than they are organizing, though the need for organization there, because of the complicated residency requirements in the various states, is greater than most other places.

No doubt this will change by the autumn term, but the sooner there is a demonstration of massive registration, the sooner the political consequences of the present war policy are

likely to be noticed in the White House.

One rather common reaction, particularly among politically aware university students, is that registering to vote for President Nixon or any of the Democratic candidates mentioned so far is not a very exhilarating prospect. What's the difference? many of them ask, which was the attitude which helped elect Richard Nixon last time.

What many of them seem to be looking for again is a third or fourth party candidate, who will somehow sweep away all the ambiguities and frustrations, end the war, abolish poverty and pollution, establish justice and equality, and overwhelm both of the old-line parties.

Well, it is an understandable impulse, and it might just get far enough to resurrect Gene McCarthy or blow John Lindsay off the fence; but with George Wallace running hard on the right and some new Lochinvar running for peace and eternal happiness on the left, nothing would be more likely to fragmentize the vote and guarantee the re-election of President Nixon.

The possibilities of the newly enfranchised blacks and young are easily seen against the fact that Richard Nixon lost the 1960 election to Jack Kennedy by 113,000 votes and won by 1968 election with only 43 per cent of the votes cast.

No doubt, in the end, developments in the economy and the war may very well be decisive in '72 and these cannot now be foreseen, but early organization and registration could also be the key. At least clear evidence of this is likely to have far more effect on the President's decisions on the war and the draft than demonstrations or legislation or senseless violence in Washington or elsewhere.