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Nixon's action raises question: Does the American system work?

WASHINGTON—A certain questioning is going on in this city and the question goes deep and those who ask it are very serious and a little frightened of the answer.

The question was put the other day by Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho. Church recited the terms of the Mansfield Amendment to the Military Procurement Authorization passed by the 92nd Congress. The amendment called upon the President to "establish a final date for the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from Indochina subject only to the release of U.S. prisoners of war." Mr. Nixon answered it as follows:

"... it does not reflect my judgment about the way in which the war should be brought to a conclusion. My signing of the bill that contains this section, therefore, will not change the policies I have pursued and that I shall continue to pursue toward this end."

"A century ago, Sen. Church declared, "it is inconceivable that a Chief Executive would have disregarded a statute, let alone dismiss its provisions in such an abrupt and peremptory way. That Mr. Nixon felt no compunction in doing so is a reflection of the low estate to which Congress has fallen."

Sen. Church spoke out before Mr. Nixon's decision to lay mines in Haiphong Harbor. Since then, the question has become more persistent. In its simplest form, it goes like this: "Does the American system work?"

The question is being asked for two reasons. First, the President's decision was taken without consultation with the Congress or with the leadership of the Congress. After nearly 200 years, has it come to this? That one man acting alone can put the people of the United States on the brink? Is that what the Founding Fathers meant when they said, "Congress shall have the power to declare war"?

Second, the question is being asked because the President's policy has been a failure — a failure in his own terms — and there is apparently nothing that anybody can do about it.

A year ago, Mr. Nixon told us, "The American involvement is coming to an end. The day the South Vietnamese can take over their own defense is in sight. Our goal is a total American withdrawal.

We can and will reach that goal through Vietnamization."

And three months ago, Mr. Nixon said, "What we have achieved by this agonizing war is to develop the ability of the South Vietnamese to defend themselves."

Three-and-a-half years it has been, and 20,000 American dead and 100,000 American wounded, and hopefully God knows how many Vietnamese killed and maimed and made homeless. Three-and-a-half years and two invasions, and billions of dollars and an inflated currency, and a generation in turmoil, and the policy is a failure.

But the American people are more than six months from an election and there is no way that they can reach their President. He does not consult with his cabinet, indeed, he fired the only cabinet member who ever asked to advise him about the war. He has surrounded himself with sycophants.

The Congress passes a law saying no funds shall be used to hire "mercenaries" in order to fight in Laos or Cambodia, and months later the Congress finds that the President has hired "volunteers" instead. When he speaks to the nation, he speaks as an emperor of old about the power and prestige of his office.

Does the system work? Sen. Church asked his colleagues to take the only step the system seems now to provide, that is to cut off the money for the war.



Sen. Frank Church
Raising the question