

Congress and Other Outmoded Programs



— Arthur Hoppe

THE LONG and bitter fight between Mr. Nixon and Congress ended at last when Mr. Nixon merely impounded the funds Congress had appropriated to run Congress.

"Pat and I," Mr. Nixon soberly told his television audience, "have always had a warm spot in our hearts for Congress. Some of our best friends over the years have been congressmen.

"But there can be no room for sentimentality when it comes to making the lonely and agonizing decisions of where to cut spendthrift programs in the budget I have proposed to myself.

"As I have said, 'You can't solve problems by throwing money at them.' And when I considered the problems we were throwing money at, one led all the rest.

"Congress, my fellow Americans, has simply outlived its usefulness."

The political experts were forced to agree. Congress had long since abdicated its powers to make war or peace. Its legislative programs almost always required money, which the President merely impounded if he disagreed.

Any investigation into the executive branch was pointless as witnesses invariably cited "executive privilege" and remained silent. And while the Senate still had the power to ratify treaties, no Presidents negotiated any, preferring "executive agreements" with foreign powers instead.

Thus Congress, having lost its war-making, appropriating, legislative, investigative and ratifying powers, had little to show any more for its labors.

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WHEN THE President impounded congressional funds for salaries, staffs, telephones, postage and particularly air travel, Congress had no choice but to go out of business.

The public reaction to this development was best summed up by a Gallup Poll which asked the question, "Will you miss not having your congressman in Washington to represent you?"

The response was, "Yes," 6.2 per cent; "No," 4.3 per cent; and "Who?" 89.5 per cent.

Congress, of course, was not about to take the President's fiat lying down. A delegation of congressional leaders tottered over to The White House to demand, at the very least, air fare home.

"Don't ask what your government can do for you," said the President sternly, "go find a job."

But this was easier said than done. After years in Congress, few members qualified for honest work. As one business executive said, "Who wants to hire a middle-aged has-been without any practical experience or any record of accomplishments?"

A group of misguided Constitutionals made an abortive attempt to take the case to the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, the President, angered by the court's decision on abortions, had impounded the dry-cleaning funds for the Justices' robes. And they had naturally voted unanimously to hold no further sessions.

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ACTUALLY, the elimination of the legislative and the judiciary seemed to make little difference. The President governed, as he mostly had during his administration, by issuing Executive Orders.

One of his first was to declare the Capitol an historic landmark "in tribute to our precious heritage of democracy."

And thus Congress, even with the congressmen gone, continued to carry out its major function of recent years — that of serving as one of Washington's three leading tourist attractions.