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The Agony of A Congressman

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AUGUST 10, 1972 was my most depressing day as a member of Congress. On that black Thursday the House rejected, by 228 to 178, its last clear chance in this Congress to set a date for total U.S. military withdrawal from Indochina.

As I began to accept the appalling fact that the 92nd Congress would go home with no antiwar legislation enacted, my mind went back to my days in South Vietnam three years ago.

Viewing the devastation which America was inflicting on the Vietnamese people was an experience which changed the course of my life. I returned from Southeast Asia with the conviction that neither I nor the American people could have self-respect until the carnage in Vietnam ended.

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I WROTE a book about the war. I accepted the invitation of a citizens' caucus to run for Congress and won. I "worked within the system" by organizing the 144-to-58 antiwar vote in that caucus of 255 Democrats in April, 1972. That vote could have produced an antiwar resolution on August 10. But it did not.

I wonder whether I could have done something different over the last three years to end the war. I chose the political order for my activities because it appeared to be the most effective. But on August 10 the political structure of the House of Representatives turned out to be totally ineffective.

On August 10 old men talked while young men died. Representative Richard Bolling of Missouri, who has been talking in his books for 20 years about the duty of Congress to reassert its prerogatives, moved to delete the entire section which would compel U.S. withdrawal from Viet-

nam this year. He declined to yield to me in floor debate. Afterwards he told me that he declined because he was afraid that I would have questions he could not answer. He was correct.

It is difficult to decide whether the majority or minority leader in the House was more dangerous or deceptive. Majority Leader Hale Boggs was one of the 109 who voted to extend the withdrawal date from October 1 to December 31. He argued that the Congress, about to adjourn for the summer, could not get a final bill to the President much before October 1. Congressmen go to conventions, have vacations and enjoy recesses while young men die.

Minority Leader Gerald Ford taunted the antiwar members of the House by telling them that they could not vote to continue the war from October 1 to December 31. For ulterior reasons he worked to retain the October 1 deadline and thus did his part in making the 92nd Congress bless by silence the air war conducted by President Nixon who, without any rebuke from the Congress, has dropped more bombs than any man in all human history.

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AUGUST 10 ended another chapter in my life. The agony of bearing witness to this war which became almost a physical pain after my days in Vietnam remains. I try not to be ashamed to be a member of Congress. I must confront the fact, however, that history will conclude that the House of Representatives in the 92nd Congress acquiesced in the most brutal war in all of history, abdicated its responsibilities and allowed the Pentagon and the President to perpetuate a war now more cruelly waged from the air than on the land.

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