

When the Cheering Stops

Washington

The Senate floor was almost deserted and the public galleries were only half-filled. It was 1 p.m. Thursday.

Senator George S. McGovern (Dem-S.D.), the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate and the titular head of his party, rose from his seat in the back row of the chamber and began to speak.

The crowds and the clamor of the fall campaign seemed far away. But McGovern's words had a familiar ring.

"In the 12 days from December 18 to December 30, Mr. Nixon undertook the cruelest and most insane act of a long and foolish war. He carried it out without a trace of constitutional authority, and without so much as a glance toward Capitol Hill."

As McGovern began to speak — more rapidly and stoically than during the

campaign, it seemed — the only colleague on the floor was Senate Republican Whip Robert P. Griffin of Michigan.

As McGovern went on to describe his "Vietnam Withdrawal Act of 1973," Senate Democratic leader Mike Mansfield, Senate Democratic Whip Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, Senator Howard H. Baker Jr. (Rep-Tenn.) and Senator Harry F. Byrd Jr. (Dem-Va.) wandered in one at a time. And wandered out.

By the time Senator Lloyd M. Bentsen (Dem-Tex.), who was presiding, interrupted McGovern about 1:20 p.m. to inform him his time had expired, the South Dakota senator was alone again.

One Senate observer remarked: "It was as if nothing had changed — McGovern was speaking to an empty chamber about the war."

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