

# Coming in loud & unclear

Almost everywhere we look, U.S. foreign policy appears in a state of considerable disarray.

In addressing the vital issues of the Middle East, Latin America, or East-West relations, Washington seems to be speaking with a hundred discordant voices. Why is this happening to a nation whose foreign policy affects much of the world?

It is not for lack of intelligent, knowledgeable officials in Washington; the Reagan administration has an ample share of them. The source of this apparent growing confusion and discord comes as a result of the growing influence in foreign affairs of the United States Congress.

Until the Nixon years, Congress was usually content to delegate most international policy to the president, intervening generally in matters of trade, overall aid appropriations, and in times of impending war. But widespread unpopularity of the Vietnam war brought Congress into direct conflict with the Johnson and Nixon administrations.

Watergate ended up as being something of an inter-governmental coup in which Congress boldly seized from the mortally wounded Nixon administration powers in foreign affairs that it had never before enjoyed.

## Policy paralyzed

Today, the deepening involvement of both houses of Congress in foreign matters has tended to paralyze U.S. policy and to burden it with some evils inherent in the American legislative system. In theory, it sounds nice to say that the people's representatives should be active in foreign affairs; but, in reality, Congress has persistently demonstrated an inability to separate America's genuine interests from the shifting needs of winning elections at home. Just as Congress lacks the political will to curb spending, and thus end growing deficits, it also does not have the resolve to take and maintain unpopular positions in foreign affairs.

Congress, and particularly the House of Representatives, is profoundly, and, some fear, inordinately influenced by domestic special interest groups. For example, Washington's most powerful lobby, the pro-Israel groups, exercise great sway over American Middle Eastern policy; the potent farmers and dairy blocs dominate policy-making over America's principal export, agricultural goods. Big banks and large industries have a great deal of influence over Congress and U.S. relations with the growing number of foreign debtor nations.

This list goes on and on. American blacks are active in formulating policy towards South Africa; Irish-Americans muddy relations with England; Greek-Americans have affected U.S. relations with Turkey and Greece; Polish-Americans with Poland; and self-appointed human rights groups have muddied relations with many important U.S. allies. In fact, almost everyone with an axe to grind in foreign affairs has gotten into the act.

The president was, in the past, able to partially resist or deflect many of these pressures; but Congress, reliant on money and votes from these special groups, dares not deny their persistent demands. No congressman, faced with expensive

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elections every two years, is going to say no to organized constituents demanding more aid or special favors for their pet nation.

Besides being under the sway of special interests, most American legislators display an alarming amount of basic ignorance in geography and foreign affairs. The most appalling example of this ignorance surfaced during the Abscam investigation. The FBI costumed some Latin-looking agents in completely bogus Arab garb and passed them off as Middle Eastern "sheiks" seeking to buy influence. A group of congressmen and senators were completely gulled by these comical imposters, offering to sell their influence for oil money. The appalling fact in this matter was not the dishonesty of the legislators — called by H.L. Mencken "America's only native criminal class" — but that these men, whose policymaking greatly influenced events in the vital Middle East, could not distinguish between a real Arab and an imposter.

Besides being generally unlettered in foreign affairs, Congress has developed its own rapidly growing bureaucracy of committees and subcommittees that have slowed legislation to a snail's pace. Foreign policy decisions calling for immediate executive action end up bogged down in obscure committees or subjected to televised hearings in which legislators posture for their constituents.

## Dissolution of power

All of this dissolution of power in international affairs — something never intended by the framers of the Constitution — has resulted in the growing confusion and hesitancy that we see today. The recent Supreme Court decision striking down Congress's legislative veto may help restore some decision-making power to the president, but the long-term prospects of getting Congress out of international affairs appears faint.

After all, it is far more interesting for legislators to declaim on the problems of democracy in Burundi, or to please local groups by sending cash to Zimbabwe than it is to tell irate dairymen that the U.S. government just does not need to buy two million more pounds of surplus butter from them. So in a world that is ever more in need of firm U.S. policy and guidance, and at a time when the East Bloc is making gains almost everywhere, America remains the only major power without a central decision-making process in foreign relations. It seems that the administration spends as much time and effort fighting with Congress over foreign affairs as it does with its communist enemies.

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