

Saturday Review

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Reforming Congress

IT IS EASY to criticize Congress. Reflecting the diversities and divisions of our imperfect society, it is certain to produce voices and viewpoints displeasing to some. Viewed in the light of two powerful Presidents, Kennedy and Johnson, the Congress is charged with being obstructionist one year, a rubber stamp the next. No doubt the original constitutional balance between the two branches is gone. But the least logical type of remedy urged seems a restoration of the balance by curbing and weakening the executive branch.

As this country has become more urbanized, industrialized, and internationalized, it has—like all Western democracies—experienced a necessary increase in the role of the executive. The fluidity and complexity of national problems require all the initiative and discretion the White House can properly be given. The answer to the present imbalance lies not in reducing its voice to the level of the legislative branch, but in strengthening the voice of the latter—streamlining its procedures, elevating its debates, permitting its majorities to be felt, making it more representative of grass-roots change, and safeguarding its ethics and honor.

To be sure, despite its talk about economizing elsewhere in government, the Congress's own budget has grown to more than eight times its postwar level. But, with the exception of those sums spent on an excessive number of *ad hoc* investigations, these increases in legislative funds and staffs have been neither surprising nor sufficient. The size and in-

tricacy of the federal agenda, the power and practices of the executive branch, the population and problems of the entire country all have grown even more extensively; and while their growth has been reflected in the Congressional workload (some 20,000 bills and 85,000 nominations presented to a modern Congress), it has not been reflected in Congressional procedures.

BOTH Houses of Congress do the bulk of their important work in committees. Indeed, one Congressman has perceptively described the House as "a collection of committees that come together in a chamber periodically to approve one another's actions." Yet most of those committees still do not have: 1) adequate staff assistance for both majority and minority members; 2) expert advice on such complexities as economics or weaponry beyond that provided with some bias by the executive branch or private pressure groups; 3) consistent jurisdictions and procedures; 4) an obligation even to consider major problems, proposals or alternatives; or 5) any assurance that a majority of their members could convene or conduct or conclude a meeting without the presence or consent of their chairman—a man who may have reached that powerful post without any regard to his ability, health, interest, or attitudes.

The House can still be paralyzed by the stubbornness or deliberate absence of one man. The Senate still has no effective rules for keeping discussion or amendments germane or for terminating

extended debate. A bill actually passed by both Houses but in different forms can still die in a conference committee composed of members opposed to the bill. In recent years the time wasted—on constituent errands, local projects, private bills, petty feuds, needless delays, irrelevant debates, duplicate hearings, and neglect of the District of Columbia—has grown greater and greater. Generally, appropriations have been enacted later and later, and Congressional sessions have lasted longer and longer (with intolerable congestion in the closing weeks).

RESPONDING to increased executive leadership and (since 1964) a heavy one-party majority, the Congress has in recent years produced record quantities of reform legislation. But not since passage of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1946 has it faced up to the problems of its own reform—problems which it must face if it is to be more and continually effective over the long run. No doubt there are those who believe that Congress should serve primarily as a brake—that the more difficult it is for a bill to be passed or a vote to be cast the better it is. But that is a dangerous premise on which to base the governing of a twentieth-century nuclear power.

As in the past, there may be shifts, written and unwritten, from one power faction within the Congress to another—between the rules committee, the leadership, the committee (or subcommittee) chairmen, and the party committees or caucuses. Further reapportionment, improved methods of campaign financing, and increased citizen participation will also help. But only fundamental reforms can produce a net, long-term increase in that body's institutional capacity for positive policy-making contributions.

Fortunately, the Congress, far more than an institution, is a group of men and women. Today, compared with a half-century ago, those men and women are better educated and better informed; better acquainted with more issues but more often likely to specialize; better (but still inadequately) staffed and briefed; less likely to be new members (despite considerable youth); more likely to be reelected (especially in the House); more responsible to the public interest; more responsive to public opinion; more concerned with foreign affairs; and—let us be frank about it—more likely to be Democrats.

Thus, the future strengthening of the Congressional role, in the absence of essential institutional changes, depends upon the ability and willingness of its members to govern affirmatively, to serve not merely as filters for detail and delay but as analysts and catalysts and creators. That in turn depends upon us all.

—THEODORE C. SORESENSEN.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Freedom of Travel

MANY THANKS FOR WILLIAM D. PATTERSON's editorial "No Dollar Wall" [SR, June 11]. I contacted the Department of the Treasury and was informed that, even though the net deficit on tourist account is estimated at around \$2 billion for this year, there is no plan to resort to a head tax or anything of that nature on tourists. Rather, efforts are being made to stimulate travel in the United States by making domestic tourist attractions as accessible and appealing as possible.

I believe the right to travel is a right which is basic in our constitutional system, and should not be placed in a position where it can be easily restricted or abrogated. Our Constitution was based on the belief that the free interchange of ideas, peoples, and cultures is essential to the preservation of a democratic society. I will do all that I can to see that that interchange is not jeopardized.

ROBERT F. KENNEDY,
U.S. Senate.

Washington, D.C.

I HEARTILY AGREE with Mr. Patterson that our national interests can be served by promoting travel between this country and others around the world. There certainly can be no better way of ensuring international understanding than by encouraging the citizens of other nations to visit us and also enabling our own citizens to travel abroad with as little restraint as possible.

SARGENT SHRIVER,

Director,

Office of Economic Opportunity.

Washington, D.C.

And Go Now to Innisfree

I HAVEN'T WRITTEN a fan letter since I was—well, never mind. But I can't help telling you that the article "Irish Interlude" by Raja Rao in *BOOKED FOR TRAVEL* June 25 is one of the most charming travel pieces you've ever published, chiefly because it's so much more than a travel piece. Perhaps it takes an Indian to appreciate Ireland. Although I've traveled much and many goodly states and kingdoms seen, I've never visited Ireland. Raja Rao's highly poetic (yet highly sensible) lines have made me determine that my next trip abroad will take me to Dublin, if not to Innisfree.

LOUIS UNTERMEYER.

Newtown, Conn.

Preserving Our Heritage

ALFRED BALK's editorial of June 25, "Our Embattled Landmarks," was of great interest to us in Dallas who are trying to preserve the site of the assassination of President Kennedy. Your term "embattled" describes the situation accurately. The city is planning a park several blocks from the scene of the tragedy. It is silently understood that it, instead of the actual location, will serve as the memorial.

SR/July 16, 1966



"I'll bet you'd just love to find a military solution to me, too."

Thousands upon thousands come to this site in a constant stream. They have signed petitions to our government asking that the site itself be preserved. The Texas School Book Depository was forced to put up a "No Trespassing" sign, as visitors felt it already belonged to them, the public. They are deeply disappointed not to find the site marked, even to the extent of finding President Kennedy's name anywhere. Speak up, Americans, before the site of this historic tragedy is lost to you and to your posterity.

MARTINA LANGLEY,

Chairman,

Committee for Kennedy

Assassination Site Memorial.

Dallas, Tex.

QUITE UNLIKE any previous or older civilizations we are in a peculiar trigger-snappy stage of development. An itchy mania obsesses us to bulldoze whatsoever stands in the shadow of "progress," be it artifact, tree, or site.

It is not necessary to become obsessed with a profusion from the past. A representative choice of the best is sufficient.

STEPHEN SOWINSKI.

Chicago, Ill.

IT IS CURIOUS to find Alfred Balk regarding the razing of Mount Vernon and Williamsburg as "unthinkable to most Americans." The preservation of Mount Vernon was accomplished in the nineteenth century only after a long struggle by a group of determined ladies. Williamsburg is [in large part] a reconstruction.

Preservation should mean more than saving single buildings. Sometimes the single building is not particularly historic, but in conjunction with other buildings it takes on meaning. Cities traditionally do little to preserve neighborhoods. The fascinating Charleston, South Carolina, is a glorious exception. Beacon Hill, of course, is not about to be plowed under. It is distracting to see most of the smaller places modernizing all their charm away, turning into nondescript conglomerations.

JOHN NEUFELD.

East Lansing, Mich.

The Negro Mood

IN HIS COLUMN entitled "Theater of Resentment" [SR, June 25], Henry Hewes indicates a comprehension of the new Negro mood which, strangely, eludes most other American critics. These critics still are moaning about "protest" long after most intelligent Negroes have relegated the word and the notion to oblivion. But then, where racial matters are concerned in this country, it is traditional that the white people begin to "understand" one point only after Negroes no longer feel the point very important.

Mr. Hewes is so right: "... the terrible conditions upon which subjective enjoyment of this sort of play depends continue only because of the willingness we have to accept racial injustice."

HOYT W. FULLER,
Managing Editor,
Negro Digest.

Chicago, Ill.