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INSIDE VIEW

Congress Muddies Foreign Policy

Too Many Chiefs Tangle President in Setting U.S. Position

By KEVIN McNAMARA

George Bush has already made his first mistake — if he thinks becoming president will give him a decisive voice in defining America's global role.

During the last five administrations, Congress has fought the president for control of foreign policy, often bitterly and with great success. This year, in addition, most congressmen are fresh from supporting the other candidate for president. In all likelihood, Bush's toughest foreign policy battles will involve not foreign adversaries, but Congress. These fights not only will tarnish U.S. standing in the world, but will likely imperil the security of the U.S. and its allies.

Obviously, Congress is entitled to its oversight role in evaluating executive branch programs, to review treaties, to examine the president's nominees and to withhold appropriations from the occasional foreign policy initiative it finds unacceptable. This is the "check" that provides the "balance." But too many members of Congress have come to believe they ought to enact their own foreign policy.

Even before November's election a top political analyst explained that Dem-

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ocrats had prepared a "fallback position" in the event presidential candidate Michael Dukakis was defeated. "Jim Wright, the speaker of the House, will form basically a congressional government," said Chris Matthews, a former aide to former House Speaker Thomas O'Neill Jr. "He will have his own agenda, he will have his own administration, and you're going to see a whole list of issues piled up, many of them resembling the Dukakis campaign."

Scholars have described this scenario as the rise of an imperial Congress. But former Secretary of State George Shultz — free to speak his mind because his bags were packed — characterized the problem more accurately in his farewell address: "What we have to fear today is not the imperial Congress, but the chaotic Congress."

Consider two foreign policy issues where congressmen have attempted to set American policy: antisatellite weapons and the Contras.

What is United States policy on antisatellite (ASAT) weapons, which are designed to disable satellites in space? Should America deploy these new weapons? Speaking for the executive branch, the Reagan administration said an ASAT system was needed to counter a similar Soviet weapon. Congress responded to the question this way:

For much of Reagan's first term, Congress prohibited final testing and deploy-

ment of an ASAT system. Then it permitted the test ban to expire, allowing the Air Force to test the weapon. Four congressmen tried to stop the test in federal court, but the court threw out their complaint, permitting the test. Congress turned around and reimposed the ASAT test ban, but then reversed itself again and voted against the ban. Did that mean a green light for ASAT? No. So much time had passed that the ASAT system's technology had become obsolete and the Reagan administration dropped the program.

What about rebel forces fighting the Sandinistas in Nicaragua? Will the U.S. support them or not? Congress is of several opinions on this issue — and has enacted every one of them:

In 1982, Congress permitted U.S. support of the Contras, but stipulated they could not overthrow the Sandinistas. Next year, it changed policy and gave the resistance \$24 million, no questions asked. Then Congress reversed itself and cut off all aid to the Contras, only to change its mind again — sort of — and give the resistance \$27 million, but in humanitarian aid, transforming the rebels into refugees. Later, Congress changed direction and awarded the Contras \$100 million, no strings attached, only to reverse itself yet again and cut off all aid to the rebels.

Such ditherings might be amusing in a Peter Sellers comedy about the Grand Duchy of Fenwick. In the legislature of the world's leading power, it's



DRAWING BY JOHN MANZO

disastrous.

Unfortunately, the Constitution offers us little guidance on resolving this problem. As the constitutional scholar Edward S. Corwin has noted, "The Constitution is an invitation to struggle for the privilege of directing American foreign policy."

Fortunately, American voters have been offering their views on the problem for years, and it is time we listened. Since 1954, voters have given Congress to the Democrats; yet in five of the past six presidential elections, they have given the White House to Republicans.

These persistent Democratic majorities in Congress show a widespread desire for the health care, education and environmental protection programs Democrats have championed. At any rate, that is what Republicans have come to believe, and they are adapting accordingly. President Bush, for instance, wants to be known as the "education president" and made environmental issues central to his campaign.

By the same token, persistent GOP control of the White House probably indicates voters prefer the stronger foreign policy promised by Republican presidential candidates. It also suggests that voters understand such a decisive foreign policy must be lodged in a chief executive.

Democrats ought to heed these messages. In the short range, since Democrats have lost the White House, their party might lose some influence on foreign policy. But looking to their long-range interests, Democrats might bring more success to their presidential candidates if they advocated a stronger foreign policy and a freer hand for presidents.

And there is another interest they might consider as well — the national interest.