

THE IRAN/CONTRA HEARINGS--AMERICA'S GAIN OR LOSS?

The ongoing Iran/Contra hearings reflect both the best and worst of our governmental system. On the positive side, it serves as a reminder to responsible officials that great risk is involved in undertaking any form of activity which is likely to give Congress the perception of illegality. On the negative side, it causes the wheels of government to come to a grinding halt, limiting its ability to conduct an effective foreign policy.

This peculiar controversy differs from others to which the American public has been subjected in that the earlier ones involved actions taken by the participants to achieve personal gain while here, it has become clear, the motivation has been purely ideological. Thus, while "power corrupts" may have been an appropriate rallying cry for critics of Watergate and earlier scandals, overzealousness in pursuing one's ideological objectives would seem to be the lesson to be learned here. Although one might agree ideologically with what was done with the proceeds of the sale of weapons to Iran (as does the author), one must also be concerned with the extent to which any such circumvention of our governmental system could be carried. But one cannot, at the same time, totally ignore the environment that has given rise to the types of activities that were undertaken by Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North and Vice Admiral John M. Poindexter--men whose foremost concern was to do what was in the best interests of their country.

In an evolution that has spanned many years, the executive branch has found its role as the maker of foreign policy slowly eroded by a Congress which may well be exceeding its legal basis for such authority. While the Senate does have

a Constitutional responsibility to share an equal role with the President on some matters of foreign policy (such as making treaties), it has no specific authority for pervading the execution prerogative of foreign policy making to the extent that it does today. This pervasion has been allowed to evolve mostly as a result of congressional control over spending. Congress has used its approval of defense and foreign aid appropriation bills time and time again to impact upon the executive branch's foreign policy objectives. It is very doubtful that the exercise of such power by Congress was ever one specifically intended by our Founding Fathers.

The result of this congressional infringement on executive authority has been demonstrated by one foreign policy failure after another. In the area of arms control initiatives, for example, Congress has effectively forced the executive branch to negotiate arms control with one hand tied behind its back.

The bottom line is that those individuals in the executive branch who have been entrusted with the authority to carry out an administration's foreign policy, whether appointed or elected, find themselves constantly frustrated by a legislative body that relishes in thwarting such presidential objectives. Unfortunately, while Congress jumps at the chance to focus on the negative aspects of a president's policies, there seems to be very little effort by that same assembly to proffer positive solutions to specific foreign policy problems with which the executive branch is confronted.

It appears Congress perceives its foreign policy role as being more of limiting presidential policy decisions than of making constructive contributions towards achieving strategic foreign policy objectives--a foolhardy approach for a body that has no specific constitutional basis for such involvement to begin with.

I hope that this and future Presidents will make greater efforts to keep Congress informed and thus supportive. I doubt that this will happen until Congress

becomes more willing to return to the limited role in foreign policy envisioned by our founding fathers.

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