



Congress acted to rein in Nixon over Cambodia during Viet War

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By Jerome L. Sherman, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

WASHINGTON -- As Pennsylvania's Rep. John Murtha prepares to use his considerable budgetary power to challenge President Bush on Iraq, he could look to the Vietnam War era for examples of successful congressional confrontations with the president over military authority, several historians say.

In April 1970, then-President Richard Nixon announced that he was sending ground troops into Vietnam's southern neighbor, Cambodia. His decision prompted protests across the country and pushed Congress to pass the Cooper-Church Amendment, blocking further troop deployments across the Vietnamese border.

"That is the first concrete example where Congress, through legislation, says 'no' to the president [on the war]," said Julian Zelizer, a Boston University congressional history specialist.

Dr. Zelizer argued that the president's call for 21,500 more troops for Iraq, opposed by a solid majority of Americans, could provide a similar impetus for the new Democrat-controlled 110th Congress.

Mr. Murtha, D-Johnstown, who chairs the House Appropriations Committee's defense spending subcommittee, has said he hopes to limit any escalation of the U.S. commitment in Iraq by requiring strict readiness levels for the military's strategic reserves, units that could react quickly to crises in other parts of the world. He also wants the United States to withdraw its forces from Iraq as quickly as possible.

For an example of how to proceed, Mr. Murtha could look to former Idaho Democratic Sen. Frank Church: "It's time to acknowledge the futility of our continued military intervention in Vietnam," Mr. Church said on the Senate floor the day after Mr. Nixon's announcement of the Cambodia incursion.

The following week, Mr. Church and then-Sen. John S. Cooper, R-Ky., attached an amendment to an appropriations bill that would block spending on U.S. troops in Cambodia.

"Church's strategy was to show they could limit presidential actions," said history professor David F. Schmitz at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Wash., and author of "The Tet Offensive: Politics, War and Public Opinion." "He would have liked withdrawal, but he knew it was politically infeasible."

Mr. Church's amendment eventually passed the Senate, despite heavy lobbying by the Nixon administration. It died in the House. A different version passed both the House and Senate several months later, but it allowed the president to take action when the safety of U.S. troops

was at stake. Mr. Nixon used that loophole to continue the air war in Cambodia, Dr. Schmitz said.

In 1973, Congress overwhelmingly approved a new Church-backed amendment, blocking U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia without congressional authorization. By that point, the last U.S. combat troops had already left Vietnam.

The troop "surge" in Iraq could be creating the conditions for a similar showdown between the president and Congress. "There's this sense that, if the executive doesn't start winding the war down, Congress is going to have to do it," Dr. Schmitz said.

The House Democratic leadership hasn't developed a detailed strategy, but Speaker Nancy Pelosi has a close relationship with Mr. Murtha, such that she will likely support his plans when the Bush administration comes to Congress for a supplemental spending package on Iraq next month.

Besides limiting the troop surge, Mr. Murtha also hopes to try to force closure of the U.S. military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. He calls it a stain on America's international credibility.

Any broad actions by the House will face tougher terrain in the Senate, where Democrats hold only a one-seat majority. But several Republicans also have voiced concern about Mr. Bush's Iraq policies.

Indeed, the president and his party may face more political peril today than Mr. Nixon did in the Vietnam era, when he was directing a war that grew under predecessors Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Dr. Zelizer said the Iraq war is more closely linked to Mr. Bush alone.

Congress also clearly has the power to make the president acknowledge calls for change. "When you control the budget, you really control everything," Dr. Zelizer said. "Congress can create amazing headaches for the president."

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