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A HISTORIC VOTE AGAINST WAR

By William Nicoson

Last Wednesday the U.S. House of Representatives made history. By a vote of 213 to 213, the House declined to support the air bombardment of Serbia initiated by President Clinton and the NATO alliance. Never before has either house of Congress failed to support military action ordered abroad by a President of the United States.

House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt offered the resolution of support, believing it would pass easily. When it failed, he chastised House Republicans for partisanship. The White House lightly dismissed the vote as a "tie on standing still" rather than a rebuke of the President.

Neither Mr. Gephardt nor the White House mentioned any of the 26 House Democrats who voted against Mr. Gephardt's resolution. The vote of any one of them was all the President needed.

How can this challenge to the Commander-in-Chief be explained? What motivated House members of both parties who voted against the President? What were they thinking?

First, they must have wondered how the President could launch a massive, long-term air assault without seeking the *prior* support of Congress. Disaffected House members no doubt concluded that the President's initiation of such hostilities without Congressional authority violated the War Powers Act. Subsequently the House refused to cure this illicit use of executive power when it voted down a declaration of war by 2 to 427. That was not a partisan vote.

Second, House members must have reflected that, for the first time in our history, our military forces had been inserted into a civil war in defense of no convincing national security interest of our own. We have launched a war against a nation fighting civil insurrection in a province seeking independence. Civil wars throughout history have been particularly bloody and bitter. Sherman's march through Georgia may not have been ethnic cleansing, but his swath of death cut down all citizens on insurrectional terrain, whether in or out of uniform.

Third, House members must also have reflected that in pursuing NATO's humanitarian objectives solely by air power, we had galvanized Serbian forces on the ground into preemptive attacks against Kosovar insurrectionists, whether or not in the uniform of Albanian liberationists. Moreover President Clinton is reported to have disregarded military advice that air bombardment alone could not, in any case, achieve NATO's objectives. Worse, in the opinion of some military leaders, the President was committing U.S. resources to the Serbian attack at a level endangering our capacity to defend our vital interests elsewhere.

Fourth, some House members -- well, one or two -- may have reflected that the initiation of hostilities against a sovereign state because it refused to sign a treaty relinquishing in part its sovereignty might well violate international law and the U.N. Charter.

The irony is overwhelming. A former demonstrator in London streets against the Vietnam war is elected President, then launches, in violation of U.S. law, an ill-considered, counter-productive air attack on Serbia which the House of Representatives, by votes of 26 members of the President's own party, now refuses to support. This is an historic moment, but not one we can celebrate.

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