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REPORT TO THE PEOPLE FROM YOUR CONGRESSWOMAN

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THE RAILROAD CRISIS AND THE "TROUBLE" WITH CONGRESS

The labor-management dispute in the railroad industry -- still critical even though the contestants have been eased back off the brink momentarily -- is an unfortunate though timely illustration of "what's wrong with Congress," with Congress as an institution and with the current state of relations between the executive and legislative branches of government.

Everyone has seen this dispute coming for a long time, just as other national problems and needs and trouble spots have become increasingly apparent to anyone who will look. Like these other situations, we know from hard and repeated experience that our laws governing labor-management relations in vitally important industries are not as effective as they should be. But there is no general agreement on the part of the President, the Congress or, presumably among the people, on what to do: on whether free collective bargaining should be curtailed at some point and compulsory arbitration required, or whether collective bargaining procedures can be strengthened, or whether other possible alternatives should be tried.

Much the same indecision appears to have paralyzed the legislative process on other fronts -- civil rights, mass transportation, education, as well as labor-management relations. On these tough issues, it seems, we prefer to drift to the precipice of a national crisis instead of confronting controversy directly and hammering out an effective policy in advance of serious trouble.

NO "SOLUTION" AT ALL

The President's "solution" to the railroad dispute was no real solution at all. It merely postponed the inevitable. The result will probably be to hand Congress on July 22 a package of legislative recommendations which cannot help but be debatable in the extreme. To expect Congress, especially in its present mood, to act on such legislation in the seven days before the July 29 strike deadline (a deadline which, by Presidential agreement with the railroads and the unions, cannot be postponed) is rash indeed. Conceivably, Congress might rise to the emergency, but judging from past experience it is not a very constructive way to legislate. Pressure, emotion and tension do not usually contribute to lasting solutions. Just as with civil rights, mass transportation and too many other growing emergencies, however, the hesitation and reluctance of both Congress and the President to accept their responsibilities for leadership leave no alternative but hasty action.

As it concerns Congress and the President, the railroad crisis is only one more log on the blazing fire which is now roasting Washington with charges of "failure," "inaction," and "lack of accomplishment." The question, a fair one, is frequently heard these days, "why should a Democratic Congress with a Democratic President achieve less than the preceding Democratic Congress achieved with a Republican President?" Is Congress guilty as charged? There are two sides to this question.

SOME REASONS WHY

Last week, for example, six months after Congress convened, the most vital piece of legislation the leadership could find for the House to consider was a bill setting safety standards for automobile seat belts. This week, it's a bill to extend for two years the definition of "peanuts."

There are almost as many diagnoses suggested for what ails Congress as there are Congressmen. They include: apathy and indifference on the part of both the people and their representatives; a lack of Presidential leadership on the major issues and, conversely, too many Presidential demands on Congress; the civil rights controversy; the archaic and inefficient organization of Congress; and many more.

There is probably a measure of truth to them all. But the question itself is sometimes based on a misconception. Many of those who accuse Congress of inertia assume that unless Congress passes the program recommended by the President it is somehow guilty of failure. I cannot agree with this basic assumption.

Certainly, the President has the right and responsibility to propose measures which he and his Administration feel are necessary. And there has been no lack of such proposals; in fact, the President is open to criticism on grounds he has not established necessary priorities among his many recommendations nor has sustained an effective appeal on behalf of the more important. Congress, however, as an independent and equal branch of government has the same responsibility to decide which of the President's proposals are sound and which are not. The failure to pass a bad bill can be as positive a contribution to good government as approval of a worthy one.

CONGRESS BUSY, BUT--

Moreover, even though Congress has completed action on a mere handful of legislation so far this year, it has been busy -- though not always on the most urgent matters. This is the first session of a new Congress and the complex, time-consuming legislative process has had to start at the beginning. Many committees, including my own, have been meeting on an almost daily basis, holding hearings and considering carefully the details of important legislation, much of which has been unusually controversial. The work of preparation takes more time than the final act of passing legislation.

Among the reasons for Congress' poor record to date, the civil rights fight has lately become a principal roadblock in the way of other bills. Southern Democrats, using their committee chairmanships and the power of seniority, are purposely holding back legislation in an effort to discourage those who favor civil rights.

Another factor is the human desire to avoid disputes and the related tendency to put off decisions until the last possible moment, especially disputes and decisions which could become political liabilities. Congressional leaders -- responsible for scheduling legislation -- seem especially human in this respect, which accounts for much of the usual session-end log jam.

Perhaps most significant of all, the country as a whole does not seem to agree on how far or how fast or in what direction it wants to go. There is no clear-cut consensus of opinion on many of the big issues. While there is no strong demand, for example, to pass the President's program, neither is there any particularly vigorous opposition to it.

We seem to be on a plateau of national indecision about many of our purposes and about the most appropriate means with which to achieve them, and this inevitably has been reflected in the behavior of Congress -- a more truly representative institution than many people realize.