

# The End of the Vietnam War and the Uphill Fight in Congress for a Peace Dividend

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## Abstract

Cold War historians tend to overlook Congress's role in shaping U.S. foreign policy, focusing instead on the executive branch. As a result, scholars have not sufficiently scrutinized the legislature's influence on foreign relations. The 1970s saw the rise of an unusually activist Congress after public trust in the presidency eroded due to the combination of the unpopular Vietnam War and the extended political fallout from President Nixon's Watergate scandal. This article helps fill in the historiographic gap by honing in on a specific political flashpoint in the House over the military budget for 1974. In 1973, a bipartisan coalition of Congress members tried to find a "peace dividend" in the budget by making significant cuts to Pentagon appropriations for the following year. This effort broadly polarized the House into a dovish faction and a hawkish faction, each coalescing around a charismatic leader. The doves followed the lead of Congressman Les Aspin (D-WI), while the pro-war House members rallied around Congressman F. Edward Hébert (D-LA). Government records, the memoirs of many of the legislators involved, and Congressman Hébert's personal records, a part of Tulane University's Louisiana Research collection, reveal the budget fight's important implications concerning the history of the U.S. militarism.

"I'm fed up with those who give lip service to motherhood and God, but contribute little or nothing in the way of constructive effort to eliminate sin," said Congressman F. Edward

Hébert (D-LA), the 17-term U.S. congressman and chairman of the prestigious

House Armed Services Committee.<sup>1</sup> Hébert was condemning Congressman Les Aspin (D-WI), a former advisor of Robert McNamara and freshman congressman who joined the Armed Services Committee in 1972 and swiftly became a nuisance to its confrontational chairman. Hébert's peculiar remark on this occasion resulted from Aspin's criticizing a naval shipbuilding program. However, by September, when Hébert branded Aspin a veritable heretic, the two men had been at odds for months. Aspin, a man who one historian describes as a "defense gadfly,"<sup>2</sup> did not get along with Hébert, a hawk's hawk so pro-war that he once wrote of the Vietnam War, "I disagree with the progress of the war. It hasn't been fast enough for me."<sup>3</sup>

The two sparred on numerous occasions, but perhaps no other flashpoint in their adversarial relationship seems more consequential today than their battle over the Pentagon budget for 1974. This paper uses Hébert's personal records, the *Congressional Record*, and political memoirs to examine Hébert and Aspin's conflict over H.R. 9286,

the routine bill authorizing appropriations to the Department of Defense for fiscal year 1974. It starts by situating the research within the Congressional historiography, as historians disagree about the Cold War-era legislature's influence over foreign policy. The paper analyzes the structural impediments that lessened the chances of success for Aspin's amendment, including Congress's seniority-based tradition and committee members who relied on pork-barrel spending. It scrutinizes the *Congressional Record* to frame the political fight within the unique context of the Vietnam War's aftermath. Conservatives in Congress had typically thought of the process of approving Defense's ever-increasing recommendations for appropriations as a layup. However, in 1973, Aspin put forward a ceiling amendment on the House floor, which proposed to curtail defense spending substantially. The amendment passed the House, but the Senate discarded it in its version of the authorization bill.

While the ceiling amendment did not ultimately become law, its passing the lower

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<sup>1</sup>F. Edward Hébert, Press Release, September 19, 1973, Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 736.

<sup>2</sup>James M. Lindsay, *Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 61.

<sup>3</sup>F. Edward Hébert, in *Creed of a Congressman*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette: The University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1971), 99.

chamber represented a shock to the system. It provided an index of the degree to which the U.S.'s failure in Vietnam had eroded the Cold War, foreign-policy consensus. The House's vote to decrease national-security appropriations emblemized a larger paradigm shift in terms of Congress becoming more assertive concerning U.S. foreign relations. The possibility of a maverick legislature opened up a space for criticism of U.S. imperialism to emerge, if not necessarily flourish. In a political system characterized by conservative domination and inertia, significant external events can galvanize pressure on that state of affairs. Such events create the historical apertures through which change enters. The post-Vietnam War Congress provides an example of this phenomenon, throwing into relief the advantages and drawbacks of representative democracy in the U.S. The federal government during the Cold War seemed, at times, to be impervious to democratic calls for reform, especially in the foreign-policy realm. The unprecedented unpopularity of the Vietnam War, however, prompted a sea change in Congress. Taking advantage of public outrage over the excesses of U.S. militarism overseas, dovish Congress

members seized the opportunity to curtail the oversized national-security state. Their movement – though it resulted in mixed success – pioneered creative parliamentary tactics and disrupted Congress's acquiescence to the executive branch. The controversial journey of Aspin's amendment through the House shows how determined representatives can oppose runaway military spending.

Congressional historians generally fall into one of two competing camps apropos the question of Congress's role in influencing foreign policy during the Cold War: the skeptics and the revisionists. While revisionists are sympathetic to the claim that the legislative branch acted as a bulwark against U.S. warmongering, skeptics contend that the presidency dominated foreign relations. Revisionist historian James Lindsay observes, "[Skeptics] argue that congressional activism is more show than substance."<sup>4</sup> Skeptics dismiss Congress's high-profile attempts to reign in the executive, e.g. the 1973 War Powers Act, as token measures. Scholar Harold Koh, in an article from 1988, explains that "the President has won because Congress has usually complied with or acquiesced in what he has done, because of

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<sup>4</sup> Lindsay, *Congress and the Politics of U.S. Foreign Policy*, 3

legislative myopia, inadequate drafting, ineffective legislative tools, or sheer lack of political will.”<sup>5</sup> Koh’s criticism is of a piece with Ronald Reagan’s famous dismissal of Congress as “the meddlesome committee of 535.”<sup>6</sup> The skeptical line of thinking holds that Congress delegated its foreign-policy prerogative to the executive because of institutional inertia stemming from numerous causes. Some of the body’s weaknesses are intrinsic, such as its division into two chambers. The necessity of getting a bill through multiple legislatures acts as a stumbling block to reform. The example of Aspin’s amendment dying in the Senate demonstrates that phenomenon though the amendment’s success in the House contradicts the skeptical viewpoint. Historians who dismiss Congress’s role during the Cold War tend to be too reductive, overlooking the vicissitudes that have characterized the relationship between the three branches of government.

The skeptics’ focus on Congress’s inherent weakness obscures the fact that specific moments in history, such as the post-

Vietnam Watergate era, have galvanized the legislative branch into becoming more active. The oppositional nature of Congressional activism further underscores the significance of legislative history. When the House and Senate stood up for their Constitutional prerogatives, they did so to overturn executive foreign policy. The revisionists concede that Congress tended to defer to the president during the first few decades following WWII. They argue that by the time of the U.S.’s withdrawal from Vietnam, the growing disillusionment of members of Congress with Cold War ideology emboldened the branch. In his review of Robert David Johnson’s book *Congress and the Cold War*, Kyle Longley writes, “The bipartisan consensus of the Early Cold War clearly disintegrated in the aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate.”<sup>7</sup> When the world could see the extent of the U.S.’s boondoggle in Vietnam in full relief, Congress became willing to flout the president’s directives. While Longley interprets this sea change in Congress as falling along partisan lines, his take actually represents a slight misreading of

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<sup>5</sup> Harold Hongju Koh, “Why the Presidency (Almost) Always Wins in Foreign Affairs: Lessons of the Iran-Contra Affair,” *The Yale Law Journal* 97, no. 7 (June 1988): 1291, <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/fsspapers/2071/>

<sup>6</sup> Kyle Longley, “Silent Partner? Congress and Foreign Policy in the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 4 (September 2007): 787, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2007.00652.x>.

<sup>7</sup>Longley, “Silent Partner,” 787.

Johnson. Johnson emphasizes the bipartisan, institutional, and “value-neutral” nature of this paradigm shift in Congress.<sup>8</sup> In 1973, the unique confluence of external pressures on Congress produced a bipartisan critical mass of legislators who, for various reasons, were interested in bringing the country’s extravagant defense spending under control.

Congress achieved this degree of control not through headline-grabbing, landmark legislative victories but by means of the minutiae of day-to-day governing and procedural creativity. The quotidian nature of legislative governance contributes to the obscurity of anti-war activity in Congress. When presidents act, they can do so loudly and decisively through executive fiat. The deliberative quality of the legislature obscures its machinations behind layers of bureaucratic processes. Recognition of this dynamic helps explain why historians have heretofore paid scarce attention to significant chapters in legislative history. The arcane journey of the controversial amendment to the authorizations bill began in the – at the time – relatively placid House Armed Services

Committee. The committee became the most significant source of Congressional influence over foreign policy by the end of the Vietnam War. Hébert wrote of his desire as a novice congressman to join the committee, explaining his ambition to preserve the “military as a deterrent to war” through the committee “which control[led] the authorization for the United States armed services.”<sup>9</sup> Hébert recognized that through Armed Services he could manage the whole military budget, which, at 11 figures, accounted for one of the single largest parts of the per-annum federal expenditure. Congresswoman Patricia Schroeder (D-CO), a freshman dove who joined Armed Services in 1972, concurred in her memoir railing against the Washington boys’ club. She wrote, “I wanted to be part of the committee that controlled approximately sixty-five cents out of every dollar allotted to Congress.”<sup>10</sup> In the House in 1973, the Armed Services Committee drafted the entire defense budget. The budget, contained in the authorization bill, would then go to the House floor, where members of Congress

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<sup>8</sup>Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), XV.

<sup>9</sup>F. Edward Hébert. *Last of the Titans: The Life and Times of Congressman F. Edward Hébert of Louisiana*

(Lafayette: The University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1976), 171.

<sup>10</sup>Pat Schroeder, *24 Years of House Work and the Place Is Still a Mess* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1999), 40.

seldom bothered debating it, much less making changes.

Despite the concentration of power within the committee, Chairman Hébert's subservience to the national-security state meant that its power was theoretical. Aspin, reflecting on his time at the Defense Department under McNamara, stated, "We used to think of the House Armed Services Committee as the one we could count on to carry water for us."<sup>11</sup> Aspin's statement synthesizes the consensus of the more liberal members of Armed Services. Schroeder said, "Armed Services under Hébert was just a mouthpiece for the military."<sup>12</sup> Congressman Ron Dellums (D-CA), who joined the committee to attempt to free up funds for social programs, argued in his memoir that Armed Services did not sufficiently scrutinize Pentagon spending. He railed against what he termed "a bloated military budget that was helping to bleed our cities of vitally needed sustenance."<sup>13</sup> During Hébert's tenure, the committee's stance kept in place perhaps the anti-war coalition's most imposing obstacle. Members of Congress who wanted to steer

the U.S. in an alternative direction in light of the Vietnam War's disastrous outcome would have to maneuver around Chairman Hébert first.

The committee's crafting of the bill dealing with the defense budget for 1974 offers a case in point of Hébert's deference to the executive. He never wavered in his conservative principles, which held that maintaining the U.S.'s martial dominance should be Congress's paramount commitment. Robert Johnson writes, "Despite expectations that the U.S. from Vietnam would yield a peace dividend, in 1973 the Pentagon requested a \$5.6 billion increase in appropriations."<sup>14</sup> On July 12, the Armed Services Committee approved 38-1 the authorization of \$21.4 billion to Defense, which was \$625 million less than the Pentagon's request.<sup>15</sup> Hébert flaunted this difference before the press and his fellow members of Congress. His press secretary wrote in a statement that "the charges of his [Hébert's] committee being a patsy for the Pentagon simply are not true. More than \$625 million was cut from the bill over the

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<sup>11</sup>Jack McWethy, "Discord Surrounds Roles of Hill Units on Defense," *Congressional Record*, Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 439.

<sup>12</sup>Schroeder, *24 Years*,

<sup>13</sup>Ron Dellums, *Lying Down with the Lions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 151.

<sup>14</sup>Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War*, 194.

<sup>15</sup>F. Edward Hébert, "Press Release," July 12, 1973, Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 736.

objections of the Pentagon.”<sup>16</sup> Hébert was aware of the criticism of his colleagues and sought to neutralize their arguments. The amount the Armed Services Committee recommended was less than the number the secretary of defense requested. However, a report in *Congressional Quarterly* found that “one member of Congress who used to be a budget planner in the Pentagon said the requests are routinely padded in anticipation of the cuts.”<sup>17</sup> Despite Hébert’s strident protestations to the contrary, the committee’s minimal cuts to the defense budget were a diversionary tactic meant to obscure the fact that the committee acted in concert with the Defense Department.

Hébert’s kowtowing to the executive was in line with the wishes of most of his subordinates on the committee. House members who advocated for a bellicose foreign-policy vision concentrated in the Armed Services Committee because Congress’s informal incentive structures rewarded representatives who resisted cuts to the military’s budget. This arrangement hindered reform-minded members of

Congress. Advocating for dovish policies often meant asking one’s colleagues to vote against their perceived political interest. Defense appropriations were the most lucrative type of pork-barrel legislation. Millions of dollars from the budget would trickle down to individual Congressional districts in the form of government spending on discreet military bases in those areas. For the members of Congress representing the districts with bases, this money created a powerful incentive for them to defend the interests of the national-security state. Unsurprisingly, then, a disproportionate percentage of these representatives with skewed incentives angled their way onto the House Armed Services Committee. *Congressional Quarterly* reported that “about two-thirds of the members come from states or districts whose No. 1 source of federal money is the Pentagon.”<sup>18</sup> This composition meant that the committee typically voted in near lock-step on granting the Department of Defense most of the appropriations it desired.

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<sup>16</sup>F. Edward Hébert, “Press Release,” July 24, 1973, Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 736.

<sup>17</sup>Jack McWethy, “Discord Surrounds Roles of Hill Units on Defense,” *Congressional Record*, Tulane

Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 439.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

It is important to emphasize that committee chairmen had almost despotic levels of authority over committee members during the early 1970s. Freshmen members of Congress, who represented the generation that came of age during the height of the anti-war movement, possessed little means of challenging the House's senior leadership. The system seemed designed to stifle voices critical of the military establishment. Schroeder described the makeup of the committee, saying "Hébert ran it like a personal fiefdom."<sup>19</sup> Schroeder railed against Hébert's out-of-control sense of entitlement. In an extensive passage that included the colorful detail of Hébert's possessing a luxurious suite of rooms in the Capitol Building, she described him as "ego run amok."<sup>20</sup> Hébert was indisputably in charge of Armed Services. He could wield his power to relegate members he disliked, such as Aspin and Schroeder, to the periphery and to keep a tight leash on their activities. A few years later, the House introduced reforms to allow committee members to elect their chairmen. Liberals like Schroeder, Dellums,

and Aspin, who had resented Hébert's hawkishness and overbearing demeanor for years, voted him out. To borrow Hébert's own melodramatic turn of phrase: "A group of freshmen legislators who stormed through Congress like Visigoths sacking Rome stripped him of the chairmanship."<sup>21</sup> The fate of Hébert at Armed Services further underscores the significant amount of latitude he enjoyed while still occupying the chief committee position. Hébert's chairmanship had been sufficiently overbearing to alienate a majority of his subordinates.

Having had little room to maneuver within his House committee assignment's draconian environment, Aspin went over Hébert's head by introducing a ceiling amendment to H.R. 9286 on July 31, 1973.<sup>22</sup> The amendment dispensed with Armed Services' meticulous, line-item cuts. It imposed a maximum on the Congressional appropriation by indexing the defense budget to inflation. Congress allotted the Pentagon 19.5 billion in 1972, Aspin observed.<sup>23</sup> Considering inflation averaged 4.5% in 1973,

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<sup>19</sup>Schroeder, *24 Years*, 43.

<sup>20</sup>Schroeder, *24 Years*, 47.

<sup>21</sup>F. Edward Hébert, *Last of the Titans*, 320.

<sup>22</sup>F. Edward Hébert, "Memo," August 1, 1973, Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 439.

<sup>23</sup>Congressman Aspin, speaking on amendment to H.R. 9286, on July 31, 1973, 93<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* 119, pt. 35: 26984.



the appropriation for fiscal year 1974 could not have exceeded 20.38 billion under the auspices of Aspin's amendment. This figure was roughly more than a billion less than the amount recommended by the Armed Services Committee and the better part of 2 billion less than the Defense Department's initial request. The difference would have seemed stark to members of Congress. Aspin was deliberately flouting the national-security state's prerogative and going outside of the usual channels to challenge an entrenched committee chair. In the process, he offered a meaningful objection to the Cold War consensus that had more or less reigned in Washington for decades.

Despite the provocative nature of his action, the add-on to the bill met with a surprising amount of success. On July 31, a short while after Aspin introduced it, the amendment passed comfortably in an up-or-down vote in the House with 242 ayes and 163 nays.<sup>24</sup> The overall bill succeeded on the same day, boasting an even more resounding majority of 367 ayes to 37 nays.<sup>25</sup> Because this action represented a rupture with the

status quo, it would have surprised an outside observer. However, the forces that coalesced around the passage of the amendment did not arise spontaneously. The victory came as a result of Aspin's painstaking lobbying of "between 35 and 45 congressmen every day in the three weeks before the final vote."<sup>26</sup> He found a "welcoming environment," indicating that the Cold War consensus on constantly augmenting defense spending had already evaporated.<sup>27</sup> The House's receptiveness to the amendment underscored the U.S. political landscape's anti-war turn. The disintegration of the Cold War foreign-policy consensus in Washington carried profound implications concerning the nature of America's posture toward the rest of the world. The prospect of an activist legislature threatened the garrison-state totems of perpetual war and state-of-the-art hard power.

Support for the amendment made for unexpected allies, encompassing conservatives and liberals of both parties. One can further delineate between the diverse supporters of Aspin's amendment on

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<sup>24</sup>Roll Call No. 410, *Congressional Record*, 26987.

<sup>25</sup>"Conference Report on the Department of Defense Authorization for FY 1974 (H.R. 9286)," Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 439.

<sup>26</sup>Robert David Johnson, *Congress and the Cold War*, 195.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

the basis of whether their motivation was pragmatic or ideological. Most of the amendment's backers belonged to the former category. They backed Aspin's move either out of concern for fiscal responsibility or some other practical consideration. As Aspin himself observed in his opening remarks in favor of the ceiling amendment, "[The arguments for this amendment] are economics."<sup>28</sup> Congress had only recently passed a blanket budget cap of 267.1 billion pertaining to the federal budget's entirety.<sup>29</sup> Aspin invoked the spirit of that overall budget ceiling in his remarks, a notion echoed by Congressman John Rousselot (R-CA). Rousselot claimed, "It is wrong to believe in economy in every place but in the Defense Department."<sup>30</sup> The budget ceiling resulted in squeezes of every other department in the federal government. Given that context, there was no reason to treat the Defense Department as an exception.

One debater escalated the pragmatist case by claiming not only that cuts were generally necessary but also that the defense budget specifically was over the top. Congressman Frank Evans (D-CO) cited the apparently common knowledge in

Washington that the Armed Services Committee under Hébert acted as little more than a rubber stamp for the Secretary of Defense. Evans noted that "They [the military] always ask for more than they need because they know that this able committee [Armed Services] is going to cut them."<sup>31</sup> This argument contradicted Hébert's claim that further cuts were unnecessary because Armed Services exhaustively reviewed the Secretary of Defense's recommendation. If it were true that the department padded its projections, unbeknownst to the committee, then this knowledge would have severely undermined Hébert's defense that his cuts were already substantial. The pragmatists may have supported cuts to military spending, but they denied being critics of the U.S.'s underlying foreign-policy prerogative. They claimed merely to be advocates of frugal government. The pragmatist case for the ceiling amendment would seem to undermine this paper's thesis that it fundamentally challenged the military-industrial complex. However, Aspin and his supporters could not escape their position's anti-war implications.

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<sup>28</sup>Congressman Aspin, *Congressional Record*, 26984.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>Congressman Rousselot, *Congressional Record*, 26985.

<sup>31</sup>Congressman Evans, *Congressional Record*, 26987.

Other members of Congress, unconcerned with the tedium of quotidian governance, appealed to more high-minded rationales in defense of the amendment. Hébert himself probably had these members in mind when he charged that “The urge to dismantle large portions of our military establishment or to suddenly halt the developments which assure a modern armed force arises from an emotional and not a rational base.”<sup>32</sup> In part, Hébert was erecting a strawman as most of his opponents cited fiscal motivations. A smaller contingent of the latter did rely on abstract notions to justify its vote. Congressman Douglas Symms, a Republican no less, claimed that “We have just lost a 10-year, no-win war because of a lack of conviction, not a lack of hardware.”<sup>33</sup> Symms was one of the few members of Congress to address the period’s most divisive controversy. The U.S. had only just concluded its war effort in Vietnam following years of bloody and expensive fighting with little-to-no payoff despite great losses. Symms argued that the defeat stemmed not from some preventable strategic error in military planning but rather from an intangible issue with the U.S.’s view of the world. Little of this sort of abstract talk

entered into the floor debate. Certainly, Symms’s comment reflected the broader intellectual climate in Washington, an atmosphere of skepticism of the necessity of U.S. militarism abroad.

Though the implication of this dissent cut to the very heart of the American war machine, members of Congress typically couched their dissatisfaction in the language of separation of powers. When Congressman Gilbert Gude (R-MD) rose to speak on behalf of the ceiling amendment, he argued that cutting the defense budget would “increase the oversight responsibility of Congress.”<sup>34</sup> Utilizing the inherent power of the legislature to control the government’s spending would reign in the imperial presidency. It could force the executive to recognize its lack of free reign and have a disciplining effect on the national-security state’s warmongering tendency. In the foreign-policy context, Congressional concerns over separation of powers were virtually synonymous with liberal critiques of the U.S.’s militancy. The executive branch tended to act aggressively in its approach to foreign relations. Only members of Congress who were critical of this style of governance

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<sup>32</sup>F. Edward Hébert, “Press Release,” Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 439.

<sup>33</sup>Congressman Symms, *Congressional Record*, 26986.

<sup>34</sup>Congressman Gude, *Congressional Record*, 26986.

were inclined, then, to reassert the legislature's role in the foreign-policy realm.

Gude's recontextualization of the debate over the ceiling amendment occurred against a backdrop of a freshly assertive legislature. The House had only recently passed the Addabbo, Long, and Eagleton amendments, which condemned the U.S. military's covert combat operations in Cambodia and Laos.<sup>35</sup> In a general letter addressed to all members of Congress from June of 1973, Congressmen Joseph Addabbo (D-NY) and Robert Giaimo (D-NY) wrote that "Congress must assume control of how this nation spends its money, particularly insofar as military funds are concerned."<sup>36</sup> The ceiling amendment to the authorization, as much as Aspin attempted to cast it in a non-threatening light by presenting it as a mundane fiscal matter, was an attempt to do just that. While few, if any, members of Congress ever managed to articulate a comprehensive critique of U.S. imperialism after Vietnam, they came relatively close to doing so by attempting to reign in defense spending. The military's adventurism abroad had troubled many members of Congress. Only this atmosphere can explain the

surprising amount of House support for Aspin's amendment.

Even if most of the amendment's supporters were unwilling to couch their "yes" vote in terms of anti-imperialism, the opponents of the amendment certainly accused them of undermining the military. The opponents of the bill treated the mundane debate over appropriations as a fundamental attack on the military establishment. Congressman Dave Treen, a fellow member of the Louisiana Congressional delegation along with Hébert, said, "A reduction of 5% would be cataclysmic."<sup>37</sup> In claiming that the Pentagon needed every dollar it could get to fend off the Soviets, Treen employed the kind of apocalyptic rhetoric typical of hawks. What is interesting about this example is that he cross-applied the rationale of a muscular foreign policy to this debate over the budget. For Treen and his ilk of pro-war members of Congress, the question of how much money the Defense Department could spend related to the more existential question of whether the U.S. should be at war at all. The protestations of the amendment's defenders who insisted that the add-on was merely a

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<sup>35</sup>Joseph P. Addabbo, "Letter," June 25, 1973, Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 439.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>Congressman Treen, *Congressional Record*, 2685.

cost-saver failed to sway the hawks. When Hébert delivered the closing remarks of the floor debate, he accused Aspin of not wanting to give “the military one thin dime.” This attack, though hyperbolic, revealed the true stakes of the debate. The members of Congress were essentially weighing in on whether the U.S.’s foreign policy should be more or less aggressive.

While the House’s passing the amendment does provide a useful index of contemporaneous Congressional trends, it is possible to overstate its significance. The most obvious factor undermining the ceiling amendment’s importance is the fact that the Senate stripped the amendment out of its version of the authorization bill on October 1.<sup>38</sup> The reconciliation process that settled the differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill did not see the amendment resurface. Following this occurrence, Hébert declared victory through the press, using a sports metaphor to express his exuberance. His office sent out a press release which quoted him as saying, “We won the game 6-0. We missed the extra point.”<sup>39</sup> Hébert’s self-satisfaction, while not entirely unwarranted, is misleading to the extent that

he failed to recognize that his victory was a Pyrrhic one. The hawks did manage to ward off the national-security state’s detractors during the summer of 1973, but their success proved short-lived. By November of that same year, Congress passed the War Powers Act. That act represented the most ambitious challenge against the military-industrial complex in a generation.

Aspin’s ceiling amendment to H.R. 9286 modeled how Congress can offer a substantive challenge to the militarized state. Era-defining events, such as the Vietnam War, can produce reform opportunities when they cause public opinion to disapprove of the status quo. In the early 1970s, a slate of enterprising young lawmakers, including Schroeder and Dellums, achieved election to the House based on this widespread disaffection. Some of the more seasoned members of Congress, including many of the veterans who supported Aspin’s amendment, adapted to the new political landscape by becoming willing to curtail defense spending.

The story of Aspin’s amendment showcases both the limitations and strengths of representative democracy in the U.S. On the one hand, it demonstrates how a

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<sup>38</sup>F. Edward Hébert, “Memo,” August 1, 1973, Tulane Special Collections, F. Edward Hébert Papers, Box 439.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*

generation of idealistic young Americans organized themselves politically and shifted the balance of power in Washington. They advocated for a peace dividend. Though they fell short of achieving that specific goal, Congressional doves mounted a substantial challenge to the military-industrial complex. They followed up on that effort with the War Powers Act, one of the most significant pieces of Cold War-era legislative reform. On the other hand, the failure of H.R. 9286 reveals the extent to which government institutions can resist democratic pressure. Political graft, as seen with the pork-barrel legislative tactics on the Armed Services Committee, was the order of the day on Capitol Hill during the early 1970s. The House operated on a hierarchal structure that awarded senior, more conservative lawmakers, such as Hébert, with de facto control over the chamber. These elder statesmen possessed a considerable amount of power, which they used to ward off challenges by ambitious freshmen like Aspin. However, Aspin, not to be deterred, resorted to innovative parliamentary maneuvers to advocate for his anti-war agenda. Unable to make his voice heard as a member of the House Armed Services Committee, he circumvented Chairman Hébert by

introducing his amendment on the House floor. Aspin and his allies highlighted a path for like-minded political reformers to follow.

Identifying the means to challenge entrenched power structures matters because the peace dividend never came after Vietnam. The military budget continued to grow at a fast pace after 1973. The vast resources of the Defense Department enabled the U.S. to continue to involve itself in disastrous military quagmires following the Vietnam War. Simultaneously, the Pentagon's outsized share of state resources continued to detract from the U.S.'s public welfare provisions. As Ron Dellums wrote, to "free dollars from the military budget" is "to fund social priorities."<sup>40</sup> Dellums recontextualized the debate over military spending to encompass the domestic sphere. He pointed out that not only was the country's orientation toward the rest of the world overly aggressive, but also the U.S.'s focus on overseas entanglements took away from its capacity to care for its own citizens at home. As long as the U.S. overinvested in its military well past the point of diminishing returns, it kept alive the risk that it would enter into yet another ill-advised war. Too much scarce government money going toward military spending caused the U.S. to

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<sup>40</sup>Ron Dellums, *Lying Down with the Lions*, 97.

lag behind its full social-democratic potential.