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Members of Congress Are People

By Elizabeth Drew

WASHINGTON—In all of the current attention to the powers and effectiveness of Congress, one major factor that defines the behavior of the legislative branch of the United States is often overlooked: It is comprised of human beings. However much noise it makes about how it is going to change, and whatever apparent change takes place, the institutional arrangements and procedures of Congress have been and will be affected by some recognizable attributes of human nature. Old Adam is alive and well and answering (sometimes) quorum calls.

● Ego. The quality of ego that motivates people to seek political office is not conducive to collective action once they succeed. Each member of Congress is wont to consider himself a sort of autonomous principality, sent forth to Washington by an adulatory constituency. Having arrived, they find it difficult to accommodate their views, work for legislation that does not bear their name, or spend time on the dreary business of seeking each others' support and counting the votes on forthcoming bills. What's more, the lawmakers come to learn that this is not the sort of thing to which glory attaches. A thumping speech is more likely to attract the attention of the press galleries and the hometown papers than is quiet work in the corridors to change national policy.

● Limited attention span. The people in Congress, like people who are not in Congress, are endowed with a rather limited attention span. A member of Congress' relationship with any particular national issue is likely to be of rather brief duration. Anyone who stays with an issue for very long may be considered by his colleagues and by the press to be a little bit odd, somewhat obsessive, a joke. (They laughed at the way Wayne Morse went on about the war.)

● Sensitivity to peer pressure. The pressures are strong to go along, be a good old boy (even the few women in Congress must be good old boys), not to hold out too long or fight too hard for a particular position. A Con-

gressman's effectiveness is considered to be in direct proportion to his willingness to trade favors, to blur issues. The correct pattern of behavior is seen to be to please one's colleagues, proceed fraternally. When a member of Congress casts a vote on a particular motion, he is as likely to be persuaded by who is behind it as by what it is about. It is particularly useful to earn the esteem of the most senior members, for this way lies the route to what the politicians hold dear: choice committee assignments, large offices and staffs.

● Ambition. Members of Congress are human beings whose careers are based on ambition and dealing and manipulating. 535 of them, assembled under one roof, need a law of the jungle. When they say that the alternative to the seniority system would be chaos, they know whereof they speak. Recent alterations in the mechanics of the system did not change the results; the most senior members still have supremacy. The rules of procedure which give representatives of some of the citizens more voice in national policy than representatives of other citizens do help to keep all hell from breaking loose.

● The instinct for self-preservation. There may be no greater motivation on the part of politicians once they get to Congress than the desire to stay there. The powerful instinct for self-preservation informs a Congressman that it is the better part of wisdom not to stray too far from what is seen to be the political mainstream. They remember their fearless, and former, colleagues. The more a politician considers the choice between being an elected pussycat or a defeated lion, the more likely he is to purr. Moreover, the assumption on Capitol Hill is that it is not the work on the great issues, but the little things that count. In the kaleidoscope of a politician's day, it is remarkable if five profound national problems get more than a flickering moment of attention amidst the greeting of constituents, hearing out of lobbyists, attempting to fix someone's problem with a government agency, raising money for re-election. (All of the aforesaid activities are not mutually exclusive.)

In sum, Congress does not do more

because the people who are in it do not choose to do more. A great many members of Congress, it must be remembered, do not think that there is very much to do. Moreover, many of them are weary, and old, and only infrequently capable of energetic legislative action. This is the sort of thing would-be reformers know, but dare not say out loud; the pretense that the Congress is an institution capable of doing a great deal more is critical to getting it to do any more. The humanity of its members explains why, after Congress engages in one of its rare great legislative battles, it is very much harder to spur it on to the next. Not unlike the rest of us after an expenditure of effort, they want a let-up.

But the public in whose ostensible behalf these people are working does have reason for hope. There are some vital, even remarkable, members of Congress whose spirit does not get beaten. Congress is beginning to realize that the public is not watching with undiluted admiration. It has noticed that incumbency is not the safe perch it used to be. The ease with which President Nixon moved into the vacuum blew the cover of secrecy about legislative ineptitude. If the Congress changes, it will be the old human instinct for survival at work.

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