CONGRESS VOTES TO END IMPORTS FROM RHODESIA

The Congress finally voted during the week of March 14 to authorize the President to implement U.N. sanctions against Rhodesia. This action clears the way for an end to imports of "strategic and critical materials" from Rhodesia which had been permitted since 1972 when the "Byrd Amendment" was first enacted. The House passed H.R. 1746 on March 14 by a vote of 250-46. Of this number, 44 members changed their votes from opposing sanctions in 1975 to supporting the bill this year. The Senate passed the bill by an even more decisive margin of 66-26 on March 16.

The vote was almost entirely a measure of President Carter's clout with Congress on foreign policy. The sanctions vote was the first foreign policy issue to be considered by Congress in the new session, and the Carter Administration made it clear that it wanted an affirmative vote. Carter was particularly anxious to complete the "repeal" of the Byrd Amendment before delivering his speech at the United Nations on March 17.

WHY CONGRESS TURNED AROUND

How did the bill pass this time, after two unsuccessful efforts in the House in 1972 and 1975?

The first new political development was that the stainless steel industry backed off from its formerly very strong support for the Byrd Amendment. Now they claimed that they no longer needed Rhodesian chromium products because "new technological innovations" (which were actually developed in the late 1960's), permitting them to use lower-grade ores available from sources other than Rhodesia, especially from South Africa. Rhodesian imports of chromium products had already decreased significantly in 1976 because of the closure of Mozambique's border and the slow-down in the Rhodesian mining industry. At least seven House Members, including John Dent who led the House battles to retain the Byrd Amendment in the past, switched this time because the steel industry pressure subsided.

The second obvious factor was the greater attention given to southern Africa over the last year, and the growing involvement of the U.S. in trying to influence the outcome of political settlements there. Members of Congress appear to have accepted the general proposition that a transition from minority to majority rule is in the offing in Rhodesia, and that there is little benefit in continuing to side openly with the Smith regime. In the Senate, ardent conservatives like Harry Byrd, James Allen and Jessie Helms were an exception to this rule, and continued to argue that Rhodesia is an independent state in whose affairs the U.S. is meddling.

Thirdly, the Carter Administration did actively support the bill, in contrast to the limited verbal support from Ford and Nixon. Liberal and moderate Democrats supported Carter's desire to get a symbolic vote expressing U.S. support for majority rule in southern Africa and a definite break from the previous Administration. Many Republicans opposed the measure just as ardentlly for the same reason. The final vote in the House at least was quite partisan as a result. Only 36 House Republicans voted for the sanctions bill, while 95 voted against. (Surprisingly, however, even this lopsided vote was stronger than the Republican support under a Republican Administration; only 22 Republicans supported ending Rhodesia imports in 1975.) In the Senate, Republicans were evenly split, 18 supporting the bill and 17 opposing it.

Conservatives of both parties spent many hours offering debilitating amendments in hopes of delaying passage and forcing a House/Senate conference on differences in language so Carter wouldn't have the vote to deliver at the U.N. on March 17. Amendments covered every conceivable foreign policy subject: prohibiting chrome imports from any country which violates human rights, delaying enactment and requiring the President to submit a report on the effects of the bill on the Rhodesian negotiations, claiming that U.S. compliance with sanctions is a non-tariff barrier in violation of its treaty obligation under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), tying all imports with concern of a U.S. liaison office in Rhodesia and so on.
couragement of a parallel Rhodesian office here, suspending the provisions of the bill if the price of chrome doubled, and providing for the implementation of the legislation only if the President found that all U.N. members comply with sanctions.

Two amendments were accepted. One was offered by Senator Byrd and Representative Ichord, a conservative from Missouri who visited Rhodesia and South Africa in 1975 with Congressmen John Dent and Harold Runnels. It provides that "the President may suspend the operation of the bill if he determines that such suspension would encourage immoral negotiations and further the peaceable transfer of governing power from minority rule to majority rule in Southern Rhodesia. The provisions of the bill shall be suspended to the extent that the bill itself was discretionary. The second was a committee amendment which exempts from the provisions of the bill shipments from Rhodesia which are in transit at the time of its enactment."