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What checks and balances?

Joan Chittister | Oct. 27, 2006 From Where I Stand

I remember where I was the day Congress approved the decision of the president to invade Iraq. In fact, I wrote about it in this column. I was in Ireland where I had been watching the British Parliament debate the issue on public television for days.

Members of Parliament riddled Tony Blair with questions.

Some cabinet members, absolutely appalled by the level of ?proof? offered to support the contention that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, resigned.

Here, in the United States, on the other hand, after almost no debate whatsoever -- certainly none the public could see -- our Congress marched down the steps of the Capitol, looked into the lens of television cameras and said to the American public, ?We have to get behind the President.? And they did. Overwhelmingly. With far too few exceptions. And in almost total silence about it.

What?s more, anyone who didn?t ?get behind the President,? anyone who even so much as questioned the invasion, got labeled ?unpatriotic.?

That was, of course, before it was clear there were no weapons of mass destruction after all.

That was before the dead and wounded of both stripes -- U.S. and Iraqi -- began to be paraded across the screens of the country in lieu of those applauding members of Congress.

That was before it began to dawn on the U.S. public that not only was there no justifiable reason for going into Iraq, there was, apparently, no way of getting out. Honorably. Without leaving in our wake the destruction, genocide, and civil war which we had unleashed there.

As a result, it seems, the mild, docile, mute, nonconstitutional approach of the U.S. Congress in the face of an imperial presidency has come home to roost.

This year?s mid-term election is not simply a commentary on the presidency. It is a commentary on a say-nothing, do-nothing Congress, as well. The degree of public dissatisfaction with Congress as an institution shines bright and clear in every single poll on the subject. But is that fair?

Doesn?t the responsibility for successful governance lie squarely with the presidency in a democracy? Well, maybe. But not always, And, actually, only partially at any time.

In a democracy, interestingly enough -- at least in this one -- it is not always when the presidency and the Congress are in agreement that the country is necessarily getting the best possible government. In fact, people

are beginning to say out loud in this country that this government, though apparently totally integrated, is ?broken,? defective -- in other words, dysfunctional.

Broken? Impossible. Everything the present Administration has proposed is now a law.

Only the middle class face rising taxes. The Administration tells us that not taxing those who are best able to pay will boost the economy by boosting corporate profits, yet the minimum wage stays exactly the same.

We can now invade any country we want to whether we can prove cause or not and that will surely ?improve our economy? by keeping the military-industrial complex working.

Now we have the legislative right to redefine torture and the Geneva Conventions. That means that what we say is not torture isn?t, and any foreign suspect is, therefore, at the mercy of our techniques, international law or no international al. No one tells us, of course, when that new technique won?t also be extended to our own prisoners and suspects.

Best of all, when we put someone in jail, thanks to the loss of the principle of habeas corpus, they will not be allowed to appeal to the courts to determine if their incarceration is really legal, really based on fact. Now we can lock up people we don?t like and just throw away the key.

And while all of this was going on we heard hardly a sound out of Congress about any of it. Legislation is swift and easy in a veritable one-party system.

But how can that be? I mean, if the likes of you and me frown when we hear those things, don?t you think we ought to be able to find that same uncertainty on Capitol Hill?

Well, the Democrats say they?re at the mercy of a Republican majority and so they?re powerless to do anything about anything. But they also say very little anywhere else that indicates to the U.S. public why they opposed such programs -- if they did.

The Republicans say they?re protecting the country and so anything goes. Including our integrity, apparently. Their role, they say, is to see that the laws this president wants passed get passed. So much for the rest of us.

Clearly, party politics has taken over the whole notion of personal responsibility, or public service, or high ideals.

?GOP Candidates Running Away from their Party,? the CNN headline reads as the election draws near -- which is very strange given the fact that all of them stayed with that party, with those programs, with this philosophy of slash and burn almost entirely.

No doubt about it, these years have reshaped the very nature of a checks and balances system.

One thing this recent history has made clear: members of Congress can?t possibly be voting their conscience. The vast majority are all clearly voting the party line. The numbers are always the same. And those who don?t -- like John Murtha for instance -- find themselves alone or isolated. And that despite the failure of present policies.

The question upon which the credibility of the U.S. now depends is whether or not, having destabilized Iraq, having created the vacuum that is creating a civil war, it is better for that country for us to leave now or to stay and clean up the mess we?ve made -- if such a thing is possible. All we have is the word of a president who says we won?t leave till ?the job is over.? Whatever that means.

Despite the centrality of the Iraq question in all U.S. endeavors, we haven?t seen a single congressional debate on the subject -- let alone weeks of it.

Surely that is a sign that something in our system of checks and balances isn?t working. What can possibly be done to fix it?

Well, maybe we need some citizen committees to lead the country in a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of proportional voting. Giving political parties the percentage of seats equal to the percentage of votes they garner in elections rather than the winner-take-all system we have now might at least broaden the voice of the public in Congress.

Or maybe we need to consider dividing the government so that whichever party wins the presidency, the other party, by default, gets the Congress in order to require the kind of compromise we are now not getting.

Or maybe the only thing we can possibly do as individuals is to refuse to register as anything but Independent, however many parties are running. That way none of them would be able to take a single vote for granted.

From where I stand, that means that there would then be only one political party to placate again: us. It?s a thought.

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